Underworld Kings

ALL THE DANGEROUS Things

USA Today Bestselling Author

JENIKA SNOW

ALL THE DANGEROUS THINGS

UNDERWORLD KINGS
BOOK 5

JENIKA SNOW

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ALL THE DANGEROUS THINGS (Underworld Kings)

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He was a monster, a killer, the type of man my brothers kept me away from.

Gio, my sister-in-law's brother and the head of the West Coast Cosa Nostra, was family and off-limits.

Maybe that was why I was so drawn to him. Violence and death clung to him like he was born in the pits of hell, and he thrived on it.

Despite everything, I started a relationship with the devil himself, and I fell in love.

I had to keep it a secret, knowing my brothers would kill Gio if they found out.

But when I discovered I was pregnant, hiding it was impossible.

To make matters worse, Gio and my brothers found themselves entangled with a dangerous new syndicate.

It was a situation that threatened to ignite chaos and conflict, involving everyone I cared about.

Including my new forbidden lover and the baby we were bringing into this hell on earth.

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CONTENT WARNINGS

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PROLOGUE

TATIANA

I didn’t need to look down at the double pink lines to know what my fate was. I knew it was sealed the moment I realized I missed my period.

But I waited two weeks to go to the store and get a test, terrified of seeing a positive sign staring back at me.

And so I’d gone this morning, finally forcing myself because not having that confirmation was killing me.

I had to be careful. My brothers had men watching me, protecting me in their own twisted and domineering way.

But I took their overbearing attitude because it was for my safety.

Their enemies would use *me* to get to *them*.

It had been the story of my life since before our father died… murdered by a hit ordered by those very same brothers themselves.

I’d always been a pawn, a chess piece for everyone else to play. My life had never really been mine. Not really.

Not until I met *him*, and I’d gone against the rules and done whatever the hell I wanted to.

I stared at the test sitting on my vanity.

With shaky fingers, I picked it up and stared at the results. The two lines that showed were bright pink.

There was no shock.

There was no nervousness.

I felt… nothing.

And that terrified me more than anything else.

Even more than the baby growing inside me, whose father was not only family by marriage but also the head of the West Coast Italian Mafia.

Gio.

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1

GIO

My father had been a bastard. He started beating me when I was five and hadn't let up.

I hated him from the moment I knew there was a word for what I felt toward that asshole.

He never saw me as a son. He looked at me as an asset. An heir. A weapon.

And that's what I was for him.

His gun and sword. His violence.

Marco Bianchi was weak in all ways. He was a tyrant and a motherfucker, and when it came to protecting his family, he failed at every turn.

He *gave* the abuse instead of protecting those closest to him from it.

But my father was no longer alive. His young mistress had killed him in a fit of passion and jealousy in front of me and my sisters.

After his death, I'd stepped into his shoes and taken on the role as head of the family and protector of those dearest to me.

My sisters Amara and Claudia.

My mother had never been a mother. She was a broken woman, a vessel molded to be whatever her husband wanted. She'd been a good little Italian mob wife. She watched her husband beat her children. She stood by and did nothing.

And because of that, I now saw her as nothing. She'd always be the woman who gave me life. I'd always make sure she was taken care of—as was my duty—but I had no love for her.

The scars my father and his men had given me and once covered my whole body were no longer visible. I covered them in dark ink—sweeping lines, artistic impressions, and patterns that illustrated the story of the vicious monster I housed within me.

I did what I did because I didn't know any better. I didn't know anything different.

All I saw and felt was the need for destruction.

All I wanted in those moments—the moments in which I was known as *D'yavol*—Devil—was to end the threat that was about to step into the ring with me.

To deliver the pain that my sisters and I were subjected to our entire lives.

To feel good when blood splattered my face and a body lay at my feet.

I sat in the back room of the dilapidated warehouse and waited. My eyes closed. My heart rate steady.

Butcher and Son had been a slaughterhouse back in the day. It held the city together economically. But after the business's collapse, the city of Desolation, New York, had fallen apart, broken even more than it already had been.

The property and land had been purchased ages ago by an anonymous buyer.

I didn't need to know who actually owned it. I knew it was someone just as bad as the men in my part of the underworld, but I wasn't sure if the title holder was actually a part of it. Maybe a former crime boss. Maybe a legitimate businessman who dabbled in money laundering or sex trafficking.

The person who owned this old slaughterhouse was most definitely not a good person, since they allowed torture, beatings, and killings. So most likely, they were deeply involved in the international crime syndicate I was a part of.

On the outside, Butcher and Son looked like a ruined building hanging on to its last thread of life.

But to the men like me—the violent criminals—it was a hub for illegal activities, underground fighting, and a place many took their last breath.

And the cops didn’t fucking care. They turned a blind eye because it filled their fucking pockets with blood money.

The East Coast was swiftly becoming more of a home to me than the West. And because I came to New York several times a month, I got myself set up with a penthouse right outside this shitty city.

I could hear the muffled chanting coming through the dilapidated walls of this broken-down building.

I slid in my earbuds, cranked my music, and closed my eyes. My face was concealed, a vicious half-skull mask hiding my identity. But, fuck, I hadn’t bothered to cover the inked markings all over my body.

My tattoos were proudly on full display, like a neon sign warning everyone off, letting them know how violent I really was.

Then again, no one saw me without a shirt when I wasn't D’yavol.

The vibrations of the thick metal door opening had me lifting my head and looking over to see the man standing on the other side. He was strapped with guns and wearing all black. He pushed the door open wider and gave me one nod.

I stood, rolled my shoulders, cracked my knuckles, and cranked up the music until it blasted through my ears and drowned out everything else.

And then I headed to the blood-stained cage, feeling the adrenaline pump through me at the thought of adding another tally mark to my death count.

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2

TATIANA

My father had been a bastard.

Leonid Petrov was the worst of the worst.

He once killed a man just for looking at me. But it hadn't been because he loved me or was protecting me. It was because it had been an offense to *him*, and because of that, he had to take action and show how strong he was. That he had all the power.

And when he died—when he was murdered—I felt myself become somewhat of a wild child.

I liked to break the rules, even if it was the smallest infraction. Because I knew I wouldn't get beaten or locked away in my room.

I wouldn't be a prisoner.

I supposed that was what happened when I was sheltered my entire life and trained to be the perfect, little, obedient Russian bride for some piece-of-shit Mafia member.

That was the plan my father had for me.

That was the only future I saw for myself.

But then he was killed. Murdered.

And it was like the curtains were drawn back. The sun shone in. And I could see clearly for the first time in my life.

With my older brothers Dmitry and Nikolai, now Pakhans of the East Coast Bratva, busy running things and making sure they didn't get killed, I felt free for the very first time.

They cared for me. They protected me. They loved me the best way men like them in our world could. I was family.

But I was a weakness who could be used against them.

Nevertheless, even though I was protected and watched over, I figured out how to sneak away. It was easy enough when you knew the schedules and rotations of the men assigned to guard you.

I don't know about this, though, I thought to myself.

I sent a text to Giana on the burner phone I picked up the other day. I let her know where I was on the off-chance I got into deep shit while here, which was a genuine possibility.

She'd grown up in the lifestyle and knew how hard it was to survive being a woman in the Bratva, with bastards all around, trying to mold you into something you'd never want to be.

G

Be careful, you crazy bitch.

I laughed softly.

A twinge of worry tickled the back of my consciousness. That was my survival instinct kicking in. I knew the feeling well. But I ignored it.

I wanted to feel alive. I wanted to break the mold and constraints that always restricted me my whole life.

G

I mean it, Tatiana. BE CAREFUL!

I exhaled and responded.

I will.

I tucked the cell into my purse… right next to my gun.

Giana's father owned a casino that my brothers controlled—that the Bratva owned. On the outside, Giana was sweet and a little naïve. But she repressed a party girl. A bad girl. And she was the only person I admitted all the things I wanted to do in life.

I faced the warehouse and the four men who stood in front of the rusted and chipped red metal door. I'd walked a block to Butcher and Son because, if I rolled up in an Uber, that would set off all kinds of red flags to these criminals… which was ironic in itself.

The men noticed me instantly and watched me intently. My black wig was in place, the bangs thick and blunt cut just below my eyebrows. My shirt and pants were black, my jacket baggy enough it concealed my shape and skin.

Disguised because every single person in that fucking building would know who I was because of my brothers.

Everyone in Desolation knew Dmitry and Nikolai, who had made it known I was off fucking limits. If anyone even attempted to go against that order, they'd pay with their life.

I heard about the illegal, underground fighting match after eavesdropping on my guards tonight. They'd been tossing back too many shots and had loose lips. And when they started talking about a fighter named D'yavol and how it would be an incredible match, my interest piqued instantly.

So I listened harder, and when one of them asked how to get in, the other guard had been stupid enough—and loud enough—to say the code phrase for entrance.

I told them I was going to bed, waited an hour to make sure they thought I was good and asleep, and then I snuck out.

It was easy with the fire escape right outside my bedroom window. It had been risky to dodge the security camera my brothers installed and slip through the one and only blind spot, but I managed.

So here I was—my personal cell phone back on my nightstand because it was tracked and a burner cell in my purse—walking up to the abandoned slaughterhouse, while four burly-ass-looking guys watched me.

Three out of four of them had cigarettes between their lips, a cloud of smoke swirling around them. When I got close enough, I smelled the alcohol seeping from their pores.

I slipped my hand into my purse and curled my fingers around the small pistol Dmitry had given me months ago.

My brothers made sure I had my own weapons. Guns. Knives. Pepper spray.

They trained me on how to use them… how to kill a man with them.

Dmitry and Nikolai loved me. They were nothing like how our father had been. They didn't see women as vessels or attachments or accessories. They saw them as queens to stand beside kings.

They knew women could be just as strong as their male counterparts, if not stronger.

So, even at my young age, I knew how to put a bullet between these fuckers' eyes without batting an eyelash.

My brothers were the smartest people I knew. They had to be in order to be ruthless Bratva Pakhans.

But I was just as smart, and my entire life, I'd been quiet and I watched. I watched everyone around me. I took notes on what the evil men who always surrounded me did, how they acted, and how they survived.

I filed away everything so that if—or, more likely, *when*—I ever needed it… I'd know what to do.

The men gave me a once-over, and right before I got to the door, three went inside, and the biggest one, who had the meanest expression, placed his boxer-like body in front of the metal door, blocking the entrance.

He said nothing as he crossed his arms and stared me down.

He slowly grinned, flashing a gold tooth in the side of his mouth. "Тебе уже пора спать, малышка. Беги туда, где безопасно, и Бабайка тебя не схватит." *It's past your bedtime, little girl. Run along, where it's safe, and the boogeyman won't snatch you up.*

I didn't respond to his condescending jab. I knew he couldn't deny me entrance once I said what he needed to hear in order to open the damn door. "Семь желтых бабочек умирают под солнцем." *Seven yellow butterflies dying under the sun.*

The code phrase made no sense—not to me anyway—but it wouldn't matter even if it was a jumble of words spewing from my mouth. As long as they were correct, that was all that mattered.

His smile faded, and his stoic expression slid back into place. "Это опасно внутри." *It's dangerous inside.*

I still kept my fingers around the pistol. "Я могу с этим справиться." *I can handle it.*

There was a suspended moment of silence between us before he stepped aside and gave a hard rap on the metal with his knuckles, and then the door opened. "Удачи." *Good luck.*

I didn't respond as I stepped inside, and the door closed behind me with a heavy *whomp*.

This was my first time being at Butcher and Son.

This was my first time going to an illegal fight.

But this wasn’t the first time I smelled death. It was the stench of old blood, violence, and torture that never left a person’s memory once they inhaled it.

Although there was hardly any visibility but for the muted, caged lights that hung above me as I walked down a suspect hallway and a rickety staircase, there wasn’t anywhere for me to go except forward, so I kept walking.

When I got to the bottom, the stench of body odor, spilled beer, and aggression instantly claimed me. I could hear the noise and chaos becoming louder the deeper I made my way into the warehouse.

People leaned against the walls on either side of me, and all watched me with a level of distrust and suspicion. Hell, I was looking at them the same way.

And then I was standing in a massive room filled to the brim with a crowd screaming toward the center, where a huge boxing ring was set up. The people were packed in like sardines, and the heat and humidity made it hard to breathe.

But none of these fuckers seemed to care there was hardly any breathing room. I stood there for a few seconds, just taking in the sights, sounds, and horrendous stench that assaulted me. Because there were so many people, I was shoved to the left and right until I made my way off to the side so that my back was to the wall.

The noise was deafening, and unless I focused, I couldn't make out a damn thing. But once I filtered out the swearing and cursing around me, I could hear them chanting one thing.

D’yavol.

There was a crackle from the overhead speakers, and everyone started pushing forward. Through the parting crowd of swaying bodies, I’d gotten a stark visual of the blood-stained ring in the center of the space. Several large, fluorescent lights hung above it, illuminating the dark-brown marks on the white mat.

“I know why you dirty motherfuckers came out tonight.”

The crowd went wild, making my ears ring.

“You want to see *the* Devil, isn’t that right?”

There was a roar of screams in response.

I was shoved to the side and braced a hand on the wall, feeling the rough texture that dug into my palm and scraped my skin. A hiss of pain left

my parted lips, and I looked down at my palm, seeing the abraded skin and the welled blood. I smoothed it down my black pants to wipe it clean and focused on the ring again.

Damn, I hadn't even been here that long, and I was already marked up with evidence of me breaking the rules. I was pushed and shoved even more until I was drifting toward the ring, like I'd been caught in a wave moving toward the shore.

Rolling forward and being pulled back, rhythmically repeating the movements over and over again.

I couldn't breathe as people moved even closer to me, crushing in on me from all sides. I felt claustrophobic. Suffocated. Panic started to well up.

This had been a stupid idea. So stupid.

I have to get out of here.

I clutched my purse against my chest as large men boxed me in. I couldn't even hear my thoughts, let alone form a sentence to tell everyone to back the hell up.

The crowd surged me forward once more, and because of the sudden force, I reached out and braced my hands on the person's back directly in front of me. I righted myself at the same time the man I had caught myself on turned around, which he did in a manner that set off warning bells in me, since it was so aggressive.

I felt like I was in the middle of the ocean, and the imminent threat of drowning was upon me.

In my instincts' defense, warning bells had gone off as soon as I got here tonight, but I had chosen not to listen to them.

But it all made me feel… *alive*.

I tilted my head back and stared at the man's craggy face, seeing the clear female-hating expression on his face. He sported tattoos on his forehead and temples, but they were old—faded and bleeding into one another.

He snarled, showcasing several gold teeth amongst yellow-stained, crooked ones.

I went to turn and forcefully push my way through the crowd and right out the damn building, but he gripped my arm and yanked me back to him.

"Ты маленькая штучка." *You're a little thing.*

His Russian accent made it feel like nails were being driven into my head, his voice harsh and deep, like he'd been drinking and smoking for the

past thirty years.

“Мне было бы весело сломать тебя.” *I’d have fun breaking you.*

I felt my upper lip curl in disgust. I may have been trained my entire life to become the pretty Russian wife who’d hang on her husband's arm and always do what he said. That was what my father had seen for my future.

But then I heard my oldest brother’s voice in my head, telling me I was a queen. I was strong. I remembered Nikolai’s words, as he’d repeated them countless times.

“Там был не только дьявол с властью и тот, кто командовал, Тати. Еще была сама Лилит, которая шептала ему на ухо, что делать дальше.” *There wasn’t just the devil, who had the power and called the shots, Tati. There was also Lilith herself, who whispered in his ear on what to do next.*

This man’s voice was just as craggy as his face. It was audibly and visually unsettling, snapping me back to the here and now, as he told me, “Я заставлю тебя плакать и умолять меня остановиться.” *I’d make you cry and beg for me to stop.* “Но я бы не стал.” *But I wouldn’t.*

His disgusting words made my heart race, but I kept my expression blank.

I’m a Petrov. I’m strong as hell and have an army behind me, I thought, as I pulled up all the strength I had inside me.

“Я предупреждаю тебя.” *I’m warning you.* I kept my voice strong—fiercer than it had ever been before. There was even a split second of surprise on his face as I added, “Прикосновение ко мне обеспечит твою смерть.” *Touching me will ensure your death.*

It was a lie. I couldn’t tell Dmitry or Nikolai about any of this. I would just be ratting myself out. And telling one of their goons about it would just have them running back to my brothers, hoping to get brownie points by snitching me out.

“Я с нетерпением жду, когда ты осуществишь свою угрозу, малышка.” *I look forward to you making good on your threat, little girl.*

I didn’t respond, didn’t even bother looking around for help because there was no way in hell any of these motherfuckers would help me.

The speakers crackled again, and the announcer said, “Here we go, you pieces of shit. First up… Maximuuus!”

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3

TATIANA

The bastard tightened his hold on my arm, despite the introduction of one of the fighters.

My instincts said to run.

My mind said to pull my gun out and shoot this motherfucker right between the eyes, like Nikolai and Dmitry had taught me.

But just then, someone shoved the man holding me, and I jerked my arm away. The asshole started cursing at the person who bumped him, dragging his attention away from me.

I took that moment to move backward, yet it was hard to push through the people as they all tried to get closer. But then the crowd parted, and a flash of a large body making his way toward the ring caught my attention. Something inside me made me freeze, and I got a better look at the ring.

The fighter, Maximus, climbed in and moved to the center of the ring, his body scarred and covered in horribly inked tattoos. His hair was greasy and slicked back, and although he looked tweaked-out, he was a *big* fucker and packed a lot of muscle.

He bounced on the balls of his feet before moving to the corner. The crowd quieted for the next announcement.

“And now the moment you asswipes have all been waiting for. Here comes the one… the only… D’yavoool!”

The room erupted in the most deafening sound I’d ever heard. Up ahead, even the man who’d grabbed my arm was now focused on the ring

and on the other fighter making his way toward the cage.

And that's when I saw *him*, the man they called Devil.

D'yavol.

I was transfixed as I watched him stalk toward the ring.

He was big, his muscles raw and cut, and his skin was covered in tattoos. The distance made it hard to see what the tattoos were. All I saw were dark lines creating intricate artwork.

People were trying to move closer to the cage, so they had a prime shot of all the violence that was soon to happen. I could smell the death in the air and knew by the end of this fight a corpse would be on that cage floor, blood staining the once white mat.

Although I'd never seen either fighter before, I felt this tightening on the back of my neck as I stared at the monster of a man who was now in the center of the cage.

The tattoos.

The olive skin stretched over hard muscles.

The short, dark hair that was already damp with, presumably, sweat.

And then there was the skull mask that covered the lower half of his face.

Though he only wore a pair of black track shorts, the mask, and tape on his knuckles, his identity was wholly concealed. No one would be able to tell it was him if they encountered him out in public… unless they recognized some of that dark ink that fully covered his body.

It seemed so contradictory, wearing next to nothing, with so many distinguishable marks, yet totally unrecognizable.

God… did I know him?

No, definitely not. I would never forget anyone who looked like that. Not when the mere appearance of him set off such a strong reaction inside me.

He could've worked for my brothers, which I supposed was possible. This underground fight was no doubt filled with Russians who bent to the will of the Petrov family. But unless I encountered him while he was completely clothed from the neck down, with nothing but his face exposed, I'd never seen him before.

I made sure my wig was on securely and ducked my head, hoping like hell *my* identity was as concealed as I hoped.

And then the fight started, and the noise faded away. The only thing I could hear was the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

The greasy-looking fighter, Maximus, started bouncing on the balls of his feet with his fists up by his face. He approached D’yavol, continuing to jump and taunt, but the masked man remained still. Only his head moved, just slightly, as he tracked every single one of his opponent’s moves.

Despite the roaring sound filling the room and the crush of bodies around the cage, D’yavol looked relaxed, but I could tell he was anything but. I’d unconsciously moved closer, or maybe the crowd had pulled me along with them, but either way, I could see him more clearly now. The concentration I saw in his eyes—eyes that looked light and a stark contrast to his darker hair and tan skin—was like a predator stalking its prey.

Maximus finally swung at him, but the devil blocked it easily and countered with a swing of his own. But the other man dodged it, and I could tell D’yavol was toying with his opponent as he swung out again, purposely missing.

And then the skull-masked fighter stood still, allowing Maximus to slam his meaty fist right into the side of his face.

His head cocked back, and a second later, D’yavol lifted the lower half of his mask just enough to spit out a mouthful of saliva and blood. He slid the mask back into place, and I realized he’d strategically made both movements in a way that, when he spat, his face was still concealed.

And then he rolled his shoulders back and cracked his neck as he faced his opponent, and I knew right at that moment the fight was about to end.

D’yavol was on the other man a second later, so fast I felt like I might’ve missed something while I blinked.

The devil was precise with his movements, and everyone seemed to go deathly quiet as they watched a man get murdered right in front of them. Literally. That's what was happening before our eyes. D’yavol took Maximus to the ground and slammed his fist repeatedly into the fighter’s big body.

The air in my lungs stilled, and I swore no one around me breathed either. But then all hell broke loose when the screams and roars erupted. It all came back in a rush around me, and my ears rang from the sudden intensity.

Only minutes after it started, the fight was over, and I had no doubt it would’ve been finished even sooner had the masked fighter not bothered

with playing around for his audience. When the devil climbed off the bloody, beaten-to-a-pulp, lifeless body beneath him, I stumbled backward, feeling lightheaded.

I couldn't take my focus off D'yavol as he stared at the… corpse, unable to regain my footing as everyone cheered and applauded for the winner, so I just let the wave carry me where it willed. The back of my neck tingled in a way that told me I was being watched and needed to get out of here, but I had no control.

And then I felt hands on me, and I tipped my head to the side to look at who held me, even though I already knew.

The Russian scumbag I had the confrontation with before the fight was now holding me, the look on his ugly face telling me he had plans that included the vilest, most violent actions against me.

I turned, but before I could attempt to flee, a hard, painful grasp on my nape stopped me. I had zero chance to react before I was hauled against him and then all but dragged through the crowded, nasty-smelling basement.

I reached back and clawed at his hand, but it was no use—his grip was too tight. Thinking quickly, I remembered the gun in my purse and grappled to get it open. I struggled, the pain in my neck traveling up to my skull. Tears were prickling my eyes as I tried my hardest to get that pistol, but the jarring motions as he used me as a battering ram to get through the audience and the needle-like stabbing in the base of my head made this far more difficult than normal.

I cried out and screamed for help, but although people looked at me, the fuckers just laughed, some tipping their beers to the asshole with the death grip on me.

"Ты умрешь за это." *You're going to die for this*, I warned, but it was an empty promise. I could never tell the two men in my life—who would've made this man into ground meat and served it in a butcher shop come the morning—because this was my fault. I was the one who snuck out.

The asshole just laughed, the sound making the pain in my head worse.

The crowd moved away from us to give him room to drag me—probably headed to a darkened corner to assault me… or worse.

I closed my eyes to help me focus. Finally, my fingers found and tightened around the gun, but just as I was about to pull it out, he slid his

hand up, grabbing my hair. He cranked his wrist, using the leverage to turn my body, so I was now facing him.

Suddenly, he threw me against the unforgiving, cold, hard cinder block wall. The air was knocked out of me, but the wall gave me the stability I had been missing since the fight ended inside the cage.

My grip still firm, I lifted the gun out of my purse and pointed it at the massive Russian standing a few feet in front of me. I realized then he'd taken me to one of the many rooms that were situated along the perimeter of the basement. There wasn't a door, but his big body blocked the only exit.

"Думаешь, я не знаю, кто ты?" *You think I don't know who you are?*

I froze at his words.

"Твой внешность может обмануть всех этих идиотов, но я не такой, как они." *Your little get-up might fool all of these idiots, but I'm not like them.* He took a step closer.

"Тогда, если ты знаешь, кто я, ты знаешь, что мои братья сделают с тобой, когда узнают." *Then, if you know who I am, you know what my brothers will do to you when they find out.*

He just laughed.

"Судя по тому, как ты говорил со мной, ты был мертв." *You were dead by the way you spoke to me,* I said, but he took another step forward, despite my gun and words. I moved to the side, my hands steady as I kept that gun trained on him. "Но прикасаешься ко мне? Это гарантировало, что мои братья сделают твою смерть медленной и мучительной." *But putting your hands on me? That ensured my brothers will make your death slow and painful.*

He grinned, flashing me his disgusting teeth. He shook his head as he replied, "Я не питаю никакой лояльности к Петровым. На самом деле пришло время их падения, и я собираюсь начать их распутывать, трахая Петрову принцессу, пока она не окровавится и не сломается»." *I have no loyalty to the Petrovs. In fact, it's time for their fall, and I'm going to start their unravelling by fucking the Petrov princess until she is bloody and broken.*

I didn't think about anything else as I focused and aimed. I squeezed the trigger and watched as the bullet went right through his shoulder, hitting my target. I wasn't quite ready to take a life, especially since that would definitely lead to my brothers finding out I was here.

The bastard was big and burly, and he grunted as his arm whipped backward from the force. But then he took another step closer.

My heart was racing, panicked now, so I didn't bother aiming as I squeezed the trigger again. He dodged it this time as he lunged forward, and I screamed, but I knew I wouldn't be heard over the roaring crowd watching the next cage match, even if the sound of the gun firing hadn't been noticed.

Minimal light filtered in from the main room, casting shadows along his girth as he grabbed me around the throat and slammed me back against the wall.

The breath rushed out of me once again, and I lost my hold on the gun, the metal clattering to the cement floor. It sounded so loud to me, even though I knew no one else would've heard it over the rush of… everything.

The shouts and screams from the audience told me that whatever was going on in the ring kept their focus. Despite being in the middle of getting choked, I idly wondered if the skull-masked, tattooed fighter was killing another man inside the cage.

The asshole in front of me must've sensed my distraction because he added to the stench around us as he exhaled in my face before tightening his hold so hard around my throat I could no longer even sip at the air. I knew he'd crush my larynx soon, so I began clawing at his hands and forearms, starting out strong, feeling it as I drew blood when the skin tore and opened up beneath my nails.

Although this fucker was speaking—his disgusting mouth twisting and turning as he snarled in Russian—I didn't hear a word. All I could hear was the ringing in my ears as I weakened, a sudden wave of lightheadedness coming over me.

"Fuck… you," I gritted out as darkness crept into the corners of my vision. I felt the fight leaving me as my arms grew too heavy to hold up. They fell to my sides, and my eyes closed.

It seemed like only a moment passed as everything went completely silent. And then, even though I was surely about to die, I somehow heard a low, menacing rumble through the fog. It became louder, more violent… frightening. Did it come from the asshole about to kill me? Was it inside my head—a replacement for the ringing in my ears? Was this what a person heard when their soul was leaving their body?

Unexpectedly, sweet air rushed into my lungs, and I fell to the cement floor. My hands were already around my throat of their own accord, trying

to rub the pain and burning sensation away. But it only got worse the more oxygen I inhaled, and I became more and more lucid with each breath I took.

Hearing grunts, curses, and groans, a violent sensation suddenly filled me. As I tried to focus, all I could make out were two bodies a few feet from me, one beating the shit out of the other. But things were still so dark that I couldn't see anything but shadowy figures and glimpses of a terrifying, stark-white face. I didn’t know if it was real or just inside my head. Beyond the door, it appeared the basement was empty.

What the fuck?

How long had he been choking me before the feral-sounding demon pulled him off me?

Or am I in hell?

I heard a wet, meaty sound, followed by something hard and heavy hitting the ground.

I blinked my eyes open, not realizing I’d even closed them, but everything was skewed and blurry. I pushed myself up and rested my back against the wall. God, I couldn’t think straight, and I was fighting to not pass out, my throat and chest hurting so badly.

I realized I was crying, adding to my blurred vision, but my arms were so weak I couldn't lift them to wipe the tears away.

I could smell blood in the air, stronger, fresher, mixing with the decay that seemed to be the glue holding this place together, and then I heard a *drip*, *drip*, *drip* as it became louder. No way I could’ve caught the sound over the deafening crowd. Surely, I was in some kind of afterlife because they had all just disappeared.

Yet, when the body on the floor went still, the creature standing over him moved to the side, allowing a flash of muted light to wash into the little room. And it was then I recognized who it was.

It wasn’t a demon with a horrifying, colorless face.

It was the skull-masked fighter.

D’yavol.

His tattooed skin was glossy with sweat and blood, his chest pumping as he breathed harshly. I let my gaze travel to his hands, which were still taped-up, but the adhesive material was no longer white, instead stained dark from the death he inflicted.

Several heartbeats passed with us just staring at each other, and then he walked over. I flinched, pressing myself further against the wall. But he only came close enough to grab my weapon, walk back over to the body that was beginning to rouse and groan, and place the tip of the gun to the top of his head.

I gritted my teeth as I stared into the dark, seemingly lifeless eyes of the fighter and didn't react when he pulled the trigger. Burying a bullet right in the other man's skull.

The sound seemed muted, and all I could concentrate on was that darkness creeping back into the corners of my eyes.

And then he rose and tucked the gun into the waistband of his shorts.

The last thing I was aware of was him walking closer, crouching in front of me, and reaching out.

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4

GIO

She was a little thing, a petite Russian doll, lying still and curled up in the center of my bed.

Bringing Tatiana Petrov to my home wasn't the smartest move I'd ever made, but it wasn't the stupidest one either.

I gripped the apple in my hand and rubbed the bright-red flesh against the fabric of my shirt, polishing it before I brought it to my mouth and sank my teeth in.

I leaned against the doorframe and chewed the sweet fruit, watching Tatiana as she breathed evenly. I should have called her brothers right away. I really shouldn't have fucking brought her here, but I hadn't been thinking clearly after shooting the fucker who had been about to take her life.

"Well?" I took another bite of the apple and watched as the discredited physician I called in grabbed his bag and stood to face me.

Henry Lifeflighter had lost his license five years back for writing illegal scripts to fuel his narcotic addiction. And when I found him gambling what little money he had left at one of my clubs—and owing me a large fucking sum of money—I knew I could use him.

So for the last five years, he was on call as my medical bitch whenever I needed his expertise.

One of those times being tonight.

Henry's eyes were bloodshot. The stench of body odor and the fact that his clothes were wrinkled as hell told me he'd probably been on a gambling

bender when I summoned his ass.

“She’ll be fine,” he said, clearing his throat. “Given time.”

I straightened, and he took a step back, clearly sensing my irritation. “Elaborate.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at Tatiana. I gave him this moment to collect his thoughts. Although he’d had likely been drinking all day, I could tell he was sober enough to make sure she was going to be okay.

I wouldn’t have let him see her otherwise.

When he faced me again, Henry exhaled and stared me in the eye. It wasn’t something he did often. It was his self-preservation that kept him from meeting me eye-to-eye, as if I were a predator and he was prey.

You never stared danger in the face for too long.

“It means she’ll be all right, but she’s going to be sore and have marks on her.” He exhaled again, and I could see he wanted to say more.

“Fucking spit it out, Henry.” My voice was sharp like the blade of a knife, about to slit his fucking throat if he didn’t get on with it.

I was impatient as hell and growled low. Henry took the fucking hint.

“If you don’t want people knowing what happened to her, you’ll have to keep her locked away because it’ll be very obvious in the coming days.” He swallowed audibly. “She’s already starting to bruise heavily.”

I took another bite of the apple and stared him down.

“She’ll have bruises around her neck, which will most likely last weeks. She may also suffer from memory loss and confusion.”

“Probably not a bad thing,” I said through a mouthful of the crisp fruit.

“She might not remember parts of her assault.” He rubbed his neck as if he’d been the one who got choked out. “Those small red and purple dots on her face and upper chest are what's called petechiae.” When I didn’t respond, he cleared his throat and continued. “Basically… bleeding under the skin.”

I made a sound of acknowledgement from deep in my chest.

“She’ll probably have difficulty breathing, swallowing, and speaking over the next several days as her throat heals. She had bleeding in her eyes. The blood vessels burst more significantly in her left.”

“So she was fucked right up, yeah?”

Henry’s eyes widened, but he gave a quick nod.

“But she’ll heal?”

He nodded again. “Yes. She’ll heal fully. Physically, at least. I’m not a therapist, so I can’t speak on how she’ll fare psychologically.”

I knew all about trauma lasting in a person. Hell, I had dark baggage of my own, enough that I could dismember an entire gang and store each member’s limbs, head, and torso separately, before burying them all six feet under. Yet I didn't sit in a room and let a stranger analyze my words to help me heal.

No.

My form of therapy was getting in a ring and channeling all that aggression into my opponent until they were lifeless at my feet.

“So if you plan on keeping—” He snapped his mouth shut at the look I gave him. He was smart enough not to go on with that sentence.

I couldn’t keep her here. I wouldn’t. She wasn’t my responsibility.

Then maybe you shouldn’t have fucking taken her and laid her in your bed, I told myself.

If I hadn’t known Tatiana Petrov—her fucking brother was married to my sister—and saw it was anyone else who was cornered and being assaulted, I would have kept on walking, right out of that illegal cage fight and then out the fucking doors.

I wasn’t the white knight. I was a fucking demon.

D’yavol.

I was a fucking bastard in every sense of the word. There was no other way for me to be at the top of my corrupted empire without having a bloody pile of rubble and bones as the red carpet leading to my throne.

But in this case, it wasn’t just anyone. And I didn’t even hesitate before removing the nasty fuck’s hands from around her throat.

When I didn’t respond, Henry took the hint once more and handed me a bottle of pills.

“These are for the pain.”

I smirked. “You get these from your personal stash?” I shook the bottle in his face.

He looked away and said, “If you need help disconnecting the IV fluids, call me. I gave her some pain meds through the port, so she’ll be out for a while. But if she has any other issues, again, just call me.”

I didn't respond, just stepped aside so he could leave my house.

I stood there and finished the apple and, after a few moments, finally forced myself to walk over to the bed.

I’d taken off her black wig and stared at the fucking thing now laying by my feet. Henry had to remove her oversized jacket, and when he examined her abdomen, I felt something hot and violent burn through me as I watched him palpating her belly.

I kept my mouth shut as he did his job. I knew he wasn’t just some perv putting his hands all over her, and it shouldn’t have bothered me one way or another if he were. But I couldn’t deny that seeing him touch her made me want to grab the sides of his head and twist hard enough his neck snapped.

It would have been one of the quickest, cleanest kills I ever delivered to a man. I would have been kind in that regard, and I couldn't say I’d been much of that at any point in my life.

I stared at Tatiana for so long it bordered on creepy. But fuck if I could pull my focus from the marks on her neck. Her eyes were swollen from crying, and her throat was gonna be fucked up with black and blue marks from that bastard's hands on her.

I reached out and ran a finger lightly over her throat, careful to not add any pressure. She was sedated, but that didn’t mean I wanted to risk hurting her more.

I pulled my hand away and curled my fingers into my palm hard enough my blunt nails dug into my flesh, threatening to break the skin.

Truth be told, I never thought much of anything regarding the Petrovs. The only thing I concerned myself with when it came to the Russians was the fact that I had an alliance with them.

With Nikolai married to my sister Amara, it was imperative that the bonds that tied us and our organizations together were stronger than anything else.

That was as far as my thought process about them went. And when it came to Tatiana, his baby sister? Yeah, I’d never given her much thought. Why would I?

While I hadn’t spent time fucking daydreaming about the woman, I still knew everything about her, as I did the entire Petrov family. Just like I was aware those psychotic brothers of hers knew everything about me and my family.

Tatiana was twenty-three years old, not much younger than my twenty-six.

I scrubbed a hand over my face, unsure where the fuck that thought had come from.

“You stupid motherfucker,” I said under my breath.

The pretty, little Russian took online classes for business management, but she made it known she didn’t give two fucks about it. It was more to keep her busy.

She spent a lot of time with Dmitry’s dog, Sasha, while he was in jail. I knew her brothers were protective as hell over her, but I didn’t fault them. I was the same way with my sisters. In our line of work, our enemies would use the ones we loved the most. They’d take our loved ones and dismember them before scattering the limbs across different state lines just to send a message.

That was the world I lived in. So I had to know every single dark secret about anyone who was close to me, especially those who were “family.”

I’d let her crash here tonight, then send her on her way. I’d explain that I’d have nothing to do with whatever shit went down with her and her brothers. The threat was taken care of and currently rotting six feet in the ground in the middle of the woods right outside Desolation.

“You stupid fucker,” I said to myself once again and turned, looking around at the master bedroom. Desolation wasn’t my home. It was a pit stop for when I needed to get in the ring and do damage—not just to my opponent but to myself as well.

This penthouse would never be home, but neither was my house back on the West Coast. I felt like I didn’t have a solid, stable place to let my roots grow. But then again, maybe I wasn’t the type of man who would ever settle down. I sure as fuck wouldn’t find happiness.

I stared down at my busted-as-fuck knuckles, the old wounds nothing but opened-up scabs from my fight tonight. I’d killed countless times—too many times to keep track of. These hands—*my hands*—were stained with blood to the bone.

To my fucking soul.

I took one more look at Tatiana and cursed under my breath as I left, shut my bedroom door, and headed to the spare room down the hall. After the door was closed behind me, I leaned against it and closed my eyes. The darkness taking me back to the empty storage room and where I put a bullet in that fucker’s skull.

And the longer I closed my eyes, the darker the world became, until I was back—*way back*—standing in the middle of the woods and staring down at the corpse of the first person I ever killed.

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5

GIO

THE PAST

I thought I'd feel something after making my first kill.

But as I stared at my blood-soaked hands and forearms, the scratches littering my skin—because the bastard tried in vain to fight me off—and then glanced down at his mutilated corpse a foot from where I stood… I felt absolutely nothing.

It was concerning, after leaving the woods, being so numb, so I decided I needed to get straight into a fight. I needed to feel something. *Anything*.

I'd started shit with a stranger in a back alley, getting into a brutal fight and going hardcore with the raw, unfiltered savagery I felt growing within me.

I thought of nothing but all the men my father killed in front of me. I focused on the repeated beatings he had given me since I was a child.

I'd seen plenty of people killed. I'd smelled the coppery scent of blood fill the air, felt the warm stickiness of it cover my skin countless times. But this… this was different.

After I was beaten—allowing the guy to get in some nicely placed punches—and out of breath, I wanted nothing more than to crash and sleep for the next twelve hours. But family dinner was something that had to be done.

It wasn't because my father wanted to spend time with his children and wife. No, he wanted the control. He wanted the routine, so he could exert his power and vileness onto the ones he should have cared for the most.

And the motherfucker wanted to look me in the eye and know I'd taken care of the situation the only way our kind did.

I headed to my parents' house and was with it enough that I changed clothes and washed my hands. But other than that, I stayed in a haze. I could only envision all that blood I had on my hands and felt like it still covered me.

I was about to push through the dining room door, when I heard my mother speak.

"Where is Gio?" she softly asked.

"Work."

I felt my lip curl in disgust at the sound of my father's voice. I knew my mother wouldn't get any more of an explanation than that.

We all knew what "work" meant. It meant one thing.

That I was doing my father's and the Cosa Nostra's bidding.

I gritted my teeth and pushed the door open, doing a quick scan of the room. My mother and father didn't bother looking up at my entrance, but Claudia stared at me, and I didn't miss how she scanned my outfit.

I always prided myself on my appearance. Always clean cut and put together. A good appearance meant strength, and strength meant power.

I ran a hand over my hair, feeling the short, disheveled strands.

The longer Claudia stared at me, the more I realized I didn't look as put together as she was used to seeing. A quick glance down at myself showed my shirt was unbuttoned at the collar and that I should have showered because blood from my knuckles was smeared and dry along the white material.

I didn't draw any more attention to my appearance and, instead, smoothed my hands down my jacket. *Fuck*, I thought, as I saw my busted-up knuckles were still oozing.

"Is it done?" my father asked, still not looking at me.

I waited a second to respond while I took a seat beside Claudia and started filling my plate. "Yes."

Nothing else was said as everyone ate, the only sound filling the dining room was silverware hitting the china.

There was no conversation, just this uncomfortable silence when in my father's presence that I'd gotten far too comfortable with. Fuck that.

"Has anyone spoken to Amara?" I asked in between bites. I instantly felt the air change as the shift in my father came forward.

I held back my smirk, knowing Amara was the last thing my father wanted to talk about.

“She’s married off. She’s not our problem anymore.” His voice was like a rusty, dull blade, and I was no longer having to restrain my amusement. It was gone in an instant.

I felt Claudia looking at me, and I could feel my mother and her brace themselves at the sudden chill around them.

But *their* reaction didn’t affect me, so I just kept eating. Until his words started festering as they played in a loop inside my mind.

My father hadn’t beaten me in years—not since I had become bigger and stronger than him.

When I didn't respond, he went back to drinking.

I let my fork fall to the plate with a loud *clang*. I grabbed a napkin, wiped my mouth, and leaned back, staring stoically at the older man.

The more seconds passed, the more irritated I felt. But this was good. I was feeling *something*, and I embraced it.

“Just because she’s married doesn’t mean I can’t speak about my sister or ask how she’s doing.” I made sure my voice was even and clear.

Suddenly, everything became deathly quiet, and I sensed Claudia tense even more beside me. My mother kept her focus on her plate, her throat working as she swallowed. Her being a meek and worthless mother was par for the course. Any ounce of sadness or empathy I’d ever felt where my mother was concerned had left when she let her husband beat and abuse her children and never tried to do anything about it, even going so far as to keep it secret.

I picked up the glass of wine in front of me and challenged my father by holding my ground. Without breaking eye contact with him, I spoke to the woman who gave birth to me.

“What about you, Mother? Have you talked to your eldest daughter?”

I did smirk then, when my father slammed his fist down on the table, the dishware bouncing a second before some of the glasses tipped over from the force.

Claudia jumped involuntarily, and my weak-ass mother shrank further into herself. I placed a palm on my sister’s knee when she started bouncing it wildly. When she calmed slightly, I removed my hand.

I brought my wine to my lips to down the rest of it, just so I could refill it.

I knew who and what I was. And my father realized it too.
That’s why he didn’t challenge me further.
That’s why he kept his fucking mouth shut and went back to eating.
Because he knew.
He knew I was worse than him, and he had to tread carefully.

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6

TATIANA

It wasn’t like I’d seen in movies or read in books.

There was no slow, gradual shift back into consciousness. The pain was so intense that I forcibly shot upright and clutched at my throat. I clawed at my neck, trying to inhale a full breath of air that didn’t burn like acid.

I was discombobulated, my confusion so jarring that my head spun before it started pounding right behind my eyes. I imagined someone inside my skull with a pickaxe just going to town, seeing how long they could continue to strike before I ripped out my own eyeballs to relieve the pressure.

I forced my hands away from my throat, as the pain was too much, and I wasn’t helping the situation. Instead, I gripped the blankets beneath me. I didn’t know where I was, the room too blurry and dark, with just a sliver of daylight peeking through the thick curtains.

Although I didn’t know my location, I assumed I was somewhere in close proximity to the skull-masked fighter. He’d saved me… whoever he was.

I closed my eyes and exhaled, thinking back to what happened.

He killed that man for me. But at what cost? Was I now his prisoner? Had he kidnapped me when he realized he knew who my family was? On instinct, I lifted my hands and touched my hair. Like my *real* hair. My wig was gone.

I wasn’t so up my own ass that I assumed everyone knew who I was, but anyone who visited Butcher and Son sure as fuck would. They all ran in the same corrupted circles.

Maybe he’d try to get a ransom for my return. Or maybe he’d kill me and send my brothers my head in a box as a warning— just for shits and giggles.

But when I shifted in bed and felt the tugging on my arm, all of that fear left as I saw the IV.

The bag was nearly empty, and I’d seen enough medical supplies and interventions with my brothers and their men getting patched up to know the only thing in there was saline.

I turned off the machine and disconnected the IV, bending my arm at the elbow to stop the blood. And then I looked around for a moment.

I wasn’t wearing my oversized jacket, but I could see it, as well as the wig, sitting beside the bed.

The room was pretty bare and basic, with no distinguishing characteristics that would tell me where exactly I was or who owned this place. I got off the bed and made my way to the window. My entire body was so sore, my head throbbing, my throat feeling so constricted and swollen that every time I swallowed, it was like acid burning me from the inside out.

I pulled the curtain aside and saw the early-morning rays of sun starting to peek over the skyscrapers. It lit across the city, and I recognized the scene. I didn’t know precisely where I was, but I knew I was right on the outskirts of Desolation.

It was when the confusion and discombobulated feeling started to fade that the real panic settled in. I turned toward where my jacket was and stumbled forward, frantically searching around to see if my purse was with it.

A sigh of relief—and dread—filled me when I saw it was tucked underneath. I dug inside for my cell phone. Although it was a burner, there were several texts from Giana, asking where I was and if I was okay.

Then the calls started from her. The last text I received showed an unknown number with just four words.

I knew it was from one of my brothers.

UNKNOWN

We’re coming for you.

I sank to the edge of the bed and closed my eyes, rubbing my forehead as sheer dread settled inside me. The pain consuming my entire body intensified.

I knew Dmitry and Nikolai probably called my friends until they found the only one who knew where I was. Giana.

I couldn't be mad at her or blame her for folding. My brothers could make anyone crumble without saying a single word.

"Fuck," I said breathlessly and grabbed my jacket. I threw it on just as I felt wetness drip down my arm. I pushed the sleeve of the jacket up and looked at the crook, seeing the IV site bleeding, but I didn't have time to deal with that right now. I fixed my jacket, grabbed my shoes and wig, and went to the door.

I was quiet as I turned the knob, fully expecting it to be locked, so when it opened easily, I almost gasped, then slipped out. It only took a second to know I had to go left to get out.

I was clearly in an apartment. That much was evident by the view from the bedroom I'd been in. But it was confirmed by the massive floor-to-ceiling windows just off to the side, showing the city right outside.

I braced a hand on the wall beside me as I silently made my way down the short hallway. It was only when I rounded the corner that I heard the *clink* of something being set down. My heart was racing, and I froze.

I knew I had limited time to get out of here before Nikolai and Dmitry arrived. Even if I was right past the city limits of Desolation, it would take a good twenty minutes for them to get here. That meant I had like ten minutes to get my ass going, if the timestamp on my brother's text was anything to go by.

"Come out here, little Russian doll."

The voice… I knew it.

But it couldn't be his… right?

I made slow work of moving closer and rounding the corner to enter the living room. The kitchen was on the smaller side and tucked into the back of the apartment, but it was sleek and modern and reeked of high-end everything. Especially the appliances.

I could see Gio, my sister-in-law's brother, sitting at the two-seater breakfast counter, wearing only a pair of gray sweatpants and nothing else. I felt a rock suddenly lodge itself right in the center of my throat and started twisting my hands together nervously.

His short, dark hair was disheveled as if he'd just woken up, and my gaze was drawn to all the tattoos that covered his arms and chest, even the wide expanse of his back.

I'd never seen him in anything but a suit, and the sight before me was breath stealing… in a totally inappropriate way.

Although it was pretty obvious he was the fighter from last night, it was still shocking to realize he not only killed his opponent but also my assailant.

D'yavol. The devil.

He shifted on the barstool to face me, one arm braced on the marble countertop of the breakfast bar, the other one resting on his lap. He held a black, ceramic coffee mug and looked relaxed, but I could see his gaze sweeping down my face before stopping at my neck.

Instinctively, I swallowed and then winced as the pain in my throat made itself known.

I saw something darken in his otherwise bright-blue eyes and took a step back—though I knew this man wouldn't hurt me.

My initial shock came crashing back to me, and panic settled inside my gut once more. "I have t-to go," I stuttered out hoarsely. Even talking hurt like a bitch.

There were so many questions running through my mind from last night.

Why was he fighting in the underground circuit?

Why did he keep his identity hidden?

Did anyone know he was killing people in illegal cage fights?

Why did he bring me back here?

"My brothers are coming," I spat out like word-vomit. "They know where I'm at, and I don't want to stick around and cause more problems."

Gio didn't say anything, and his expression showed nothing. I was pretty sure he could handle himself if it came to a fight with my brothers, given the fact that I'd seen him kill a man with his bare hands last night. But I wasn't so confident that he could take on Dmitry *and* Nikolai at the same time.

My brothers were ruthless and vicious. They didn't get the reputation of being psychotic for no reason.

When Gio still said nothing, I started making my way toward the front door, looking between him and the exit, thinking he might try to stop me.

But he just sat there and drank his coffee. I tried not to focus on how big he looked, sitting on that little barstool, his muscles defined and bulging.

I'd never been one to appreciate tattoos. My brothers were covered in them, and every single man who worked for them had some sort of permanent insignia inked onto their bodies. But looking at Gio's had my heart fluttering a little and other parts of me warming.

He was just so… big.

But it was when I got to the door that I realized I had no way to get home. That was when I felt overwhelming heat at my back. I spun around to see Gio standing a foot from me, his head downcast from his towering height as he focused on me.

His massive, imposing body took up every single inch of my eyesight.

"You don't need to run away just because you're afraid of how your brothers will react. They should probably learn what happened, no?"

His gaze went to my throat, and I lifted my hand to lightly touch what I assumed was horrendous bruising. It was so tender and felt so swollen. But I was shaking my head before he even finished speaking.

The last thing I wanted to do was admit to my brothers that I'd been foolish enough—and too fucking stupid for my own good—to go and put myself in a very dangerous situation.

I was actually surprised Gio was giving me this option to "run away," as he put it, or to stay and face my brothers. Apparently, being related by marriage didn't mean all of his loyalties belonged to our family.

"I think I'd rather face my brothers alone." My voice was soft, almost tender.

Truth be told, it *would* probably be smarter for me to confront Dmitry and Nikolai's wrath with a third party there. Maybe they'd force themselves to stay calm.

I ground my back molars. I knew that was a lie right away.

Because my brothers didn't give a shit who was watching when they went on a rampage. Hell, they killed men just for looking at them the wrong way.

When Gio said nothing, I took that as my cue to go.

"There's a car waiting downstairs to take you home," he told me. When I said nothing, he added low and deep, "It's your life, but you know as well as I do that your brothers are going to find out what happened one way or another."

I didn’t know why I felt sassy, but a sudden surge of defiance rose up in me.

This man saved my life. Being anything but kind and generous should have been the furthest thing from my mind.

“You’re not afraid of them, are you?” I wondered if my taunting question caught him off guard. Because, for a second, I thought his expression showed surprise.

And then he started laughing in this husky way that told me he didn’t think anything was humorous. He was just… shocked.

Gio ran a hand over his face. He had a day’s worth of stubble covering his jaw and cheeks, so when his palm skimmed over it, I could hear the light scraping sound from the motion.

“No,” he said and put that stoic expression of his back in place. “I can promise you that the Petrov brothers are the least of my worries.”

He leaned in until his lips were close to my ear. I felt his warm breath tease the shell and forced myself to dig my nails into my palms so I wouldn’t shiver in response.

“My fear of your brothers is so low it’s rotting in hell, little Russian doll.” He gave a low growl, my shiver escaping my reins and slithering down my body.

He pulled back, and his expression turned dark before he said, “You know why that is?”

I licked my lips and shook my head, even though I knew Gio was just as dangerous as any monster I'd ever come in contact with.

“Малышка, я смерть.” *Little girl, I am death.*

I didn’t know why hearing him call me that in my native tongue felt so illicit—salacious even. But my body immediately responded, heating all over again.

A second later, he took a step back, and I exhaled, not realizing I’d been holding my breath. I stared into his bright, crystalline-blue eyes and forced myself to open the door and leave.

I hauled ass toward the elevator at the end of the hall, and only once inside did I lean against the wall and exhale a breath that was shaky as hell. I was gripping the silver bar behind me as if my life depended on it.

Once I was out of the building, I sucked in a lungful of polluted morning air. True to Gio’s word, there was a sleek, black car waiting for me right outside his building. I looked behind me and knitted my brows as I

noticed what I had assumed was an apartment building was actually what looked like a warehouse or business building. Certainly not where someone would live.

But I didn't have time to give a shit about anything but my future and the ass-reaming my brothers were going to give me over this.

I didn’t have to guess if that car was for me, since the driver stood at the back passenger door, holding it open and smiling at me.

When I was close enough, he addressed me by name, and I found myself seamlessly slipping inside, not even questioning what was happening right now.

Once on the road, I gave the driver my address, but he told me he already knew where he was going. And so for the next couple of minutes, I just sat there, trying to formulate some kind of plan for when I got home and had to face the proverbial firing squad.

I had no idea how I looked. I could have checked in the front-facing camera of my phone for any evidence of how my night actually went. But I was a coward because I didn’t want to see any of that shit.

I grabbed the burner cell out of my purse with shaky fingers and dialed. Though my second eldest brother was pretty unhinged and known as being a sociopath, I’d probably be able to reason with him more than with Dmitry.

It only rang twice before the caller picked up. There was a heartbeat of heavy, hard silence, and I closed my eyes, resting my head back against the seat and bracing myself.

“I’m on the way back to my apartment,” I said with a steady voice, surprising myself that it wasn’t shaking—although it sounded hoarse and nothing like me. “So just meet me there.”

The fact that he stayed so quiet scared the hell out of me.

“If you’re not there in fifteen minutes, Tati, I’m going to fucking lose it. Do you understand?” Nikolai’s voice was calm and even as hell despite his words.

He was pissed the fuck off.

I swallowed and rubbed my eyes, knowing my brothers would never hurt me, but I also knew, in order to get their frustration out, they’d leave a pile of bodies in their wake.

“I’ll be there.” I hung up before he could say anything else, which was probably the worst thing I could’ve done in this situation. I wanted to save my voice, but I also didn’t want to talk about it at all.

I didn’t want to feel his anger and disappointment and worry. And I knew that’s what all this stemmed from. My brothers had been worried about me.

I caused that.

“I have to be home in fifteen minutes,” I whispered to the driver, not elaborating, but if he worked for Gio, he knew not to ask questions.

I opened my eyes to see him glance at me in the rearview mirror. He gave me a slight nod, and I felt the car accelerate.

All hell was about to break loose, and I was right in the center of it.

Shit.

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7

GIO

THE PAST

I’d made a deal with the devil and was marrying off my youngest sister, Claudia.

My father had done the same to my sister Amara.

Shit had come full circle. I was officially no better than dear old Dad.

Claudia stared at me with her mouth hanging open. Her expression was one of pure shock and hot, unadulterated anger.

Good. I could deal with her rage and hatred. I was familiar with it.

I noticed how she curled her little hands into fists and pinched her lips tightly together.

She wanted to say a whole lot but kept her thoughts to herself and just glared at me.

So I glared right back.

But the truth was, no matter how pissed I was, no matter how much I kept that wall of indifference up, I felt… regret. My apathy hid a lot of shit, but I knew Claudia could see the truth in my eyes.

“I won’t do it.”

Her defiance created an instant reaction in me.

A muscle in my jaw ticked as I ground my back molars. I leaned back, the leather of the chair making a soft sound from the shift of my weight and position. With my hands on the arms of the chair, my fingers drumming on the surface, I said nothing and just stared at her.

She shook her head and said again, “I won’t do it, Gio. You can’t make me. I’m almost twenty years old.” I could have chuckled from the way she said that, as if her chest was puffed up from her inner strength. “I’m an adult. You aren’t my parent or legal guardian. You are not Father.” The last part was a whispered plea.

I knew what she was doing now. She wanted me to remember how it had been. Didn’t she know I’d never forget? The memory of my father was etched into my skin. Literally.

I closed my eyes and rubbed them. I had promised my sisters I’d never be like our father. I told them I’d never treat them the way he treated us. I’d never use them as pawns for my or the Cosa Nostra’s gain.

When I exhaled roughly, I felt my expression falter. Claudia sighed in return and sat down in the chair across from me.

“Please, *fratellone*. You cannot force me to marry somebody I don’t love, somebody I don’t want to.”

I kept quiet, thinking about this entire situation, which only had Claudia's face turning red with her anger. But she was strong, my baby sister, and didn’t let her tears fall. She tipped her chin up and pulled her shoulders back, glaring at me with so much animosity that I felt it.

I smirked. “So stubborn and strong,” I murmured and rubbed my eyes again. “Just like Amara.” I exhaled, feeling the weight of… *everything* on my shoulders. “I don’t want to, *sorellina*, but I’m being pressured from the higher-ups. They want another alliance. They want security.” I rested my head on the back of the chair and stared at the ceiling. The sound of the fire crackling should have been relaxing. Instead, it irritated the fuck out of me.

I looked at Claudia to see her shaking her head at her lap. “Let them pawn off one of *their* daughters.”

“Claudia.” I kept my tone soft. “Look at me.”

It was a second before she looked up at me, but when she did, I sure as fuck felt her wrath like bullets shooting from her blue eyes.

“I’m not Father. And I *never* fucking will be.” I let those words hang in the air between us for a moment. “I would never arrange for you to marry a bastard, someone who’d lay hands on you, or would treat you like shit. I’d put a bullet in his head before I allowed that to happen.”

She said nothing, but her throat worked as she swallowed.

“You’ll get a final say on who it is. If you don’t like him, he’s fucking out. But you know this has to be done. It’s the world we live in, Claudia.

It’ll offer *you* protection too. Things are becoming increasingly volatile between the Irish and the Triad. If something were to happen to me…” I cut those words off as I clenched my teeth again and glanced away. “We know the men in our world have short lifespans.”

I stared at her again. I had my wall erected around me—like I always did—but I could see Claudia was trying to work through it. My body was beaten and tired, but all I did was sit there, the weight of the world suffocating me.

Fuck, I knew how I looked right now. My hair was a wreck after running my fingers through it constantly. I’d just gotten into a brawl hours before and hadn’t bothered changing out of my white button-down shirt that was wrinkled as fuck and stained with blood from the other man.

I noticed Claudia looking at my hands as I drummed my fingers on the desktop. I stared down at the old scabs littering my knuckles and the fresh wounds from tonight.

And when she exhaled and that rage slowly dissipated, I knew she’d listen.

“I have some men who I’ve handpicked. Although I don’t know them personally, they are the best choices of available bachelors.”

She grimaced.

I chuckled softly, knowing exactly what she was thinking. “And no, they’re not decrepit. Older than you, yes, but reasonably aged.”

“I already told you I don’t want to do this.”

I didn’t respond, just kept thrumming my fingers, and stared at her.

“I could just leave, Gio. I could take my inheritance and go.”

“You know you don’t have access to that until you’re twenty-one.”

She clenched her teeth but was smart enough to keep her mouth shut. I was so not in the fucking mood right now.

But then she caved to her desire to argue. “Father set it up. He’s been dead for five years. You’re in charge now. You can release those funds to me. Let me leave. I can change my name and move to a new city.”

I stared at her, feeling a prickling at the back of my neck. There was more going on than what was on the surface.

But I didn't pick that apart right now and focused on the task at hand.

“Claudia, even if I had the power to release your funds—which I don’t because they’re locked in legally—where would you go? You would have

to change every aspect of the life you once knew. You would have to pretend to be someone else for the rest of your life."

I could see on her face that she was mulling over my words.

"You'd never be able to see us again. Never be able to talk to me or Amara. You could never come home." I leaned forward and rested my elbows on the desk, a fierce expression on my face because I wanted to drill this home.

I *needed* her to understand my words.

"Let that sink in. Picture it. You would be utterly alone with no protection."

For a split second, my wall came down as my own words echoed in my head. I felt a flash of fear at the thought of her going underground—or, more accurately, aboveground—and never seeing or hearing from her again.

The tears I knew she tried so hard to keep from falling finally spilled over. Claudia sniffed and wiped them away quickly, then glanced out the window.

"I just want you to be safe," I murmured. "And although it scares the fuck out of me, you leaving and me never seeing you again…." I shook my head. "I want you happy, *sorellina*. So… I'll take whatever repercussions that come about from your decisions because I love you."

She didn't speak for long moments, just stared out the window of my office. I gave her as much time as she needed.

My father had pawned Amara off on Nikolai Petrov, and although I'd done my due diligence and found out everything I could on the psychotic Russian before the nuptials, the truth was, Amara could have been tied to a real piece of shit.

But strangely enough, Nikolai wasn't like that with my sister. I watched the way he was with her and was pleased to find he treated her like his queen. He loved her, and she him, and in this world, that's all anyone could ask for.

For a split second, I thought about betrothing Claudia to the older Petrov brother—Dmitry. But I pushed that fucking thought out before it had time to fester.

The fucker was in prison, for God's sake, and the last thing I needed was another one of my siblings tied to *that* Russian family.

"When is the first meeting?" she finally asked, and I held in my surprise that she wasn't still fighting me on this.

But she knew how this world of ours worked.

I was silent as I thought about her words and my next play. Because the truth was… she wasn’t going to like my answer.

“Tomorrow night.”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. Immediate regret filled me when she covered her mouth with her dainty hand. God, she was going to cry, and it was all my fault. I held my hands up in surrender. “It wasn’t my call. Carmine told me personally.”

As much as I hated taking orders from anyone, someone in the Cosa Nostra sure as fuck didn’t ignore an order from the higher-ups.

“I don’t….” She closed her eyes and took a very audible, steadying breath. “Who is Carmine?”

“Carmine Lucchesi. Head of Italy,” I said without hesitation but couldn't mask the tightness in my voice.

She said nothing, but then again, there wasn’t anything to be said. After a second, she gave a sharp nod, stood up, and left my office without a backward glance or another word.

I sat there for a long time, feeling my anger rise.

Then, I stood and walked out and continued through the front doors.

I didn’t have any clear idea where I was going. All I knew was I needed to kick someone's ass—and get good and whipped myself—so I could sleep later.

Because, right now, I was running on fumes and liable to kill the first person who looked at me wrong.

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8

TATIANA

My apartment was eerily silent when I stepped through the front door. There were no guards, and that told me my brothers were already here.

I stood still for a second and just listened, keeping the door slightly open behind me, since my survival instinct told me to do so in case I needed to make a quick escape. Which was foolish because I was safest when I was with my family.

Although I knew the air conditioner wasn't on, there was a chill surrounding me, as if I were stepping into a meat locker.

I took my time taking off my shoes and jacket. I set my purse on the little table by the door, then my keys on top of it. I was stalling, hesitant to move forward to where I knew my brothers were waiting for me in the living room.

But they didn't say anything. They didn't call for me. Didn't tell me to hurry up. They waited patiently, as if they were predators hiding in the brush, anticipating the thrill of pouncing on their prey.

When I couldn't stall anymore, I took a deep breath and headed into the living room. It was when I rounded the corner that I saw Nikolai sitting on the couch, his appearance seemingly relaxed as he leaned back and had one booted foot propped up on my coffee table.

Dmitry leaned against the wall as he stared out the window overlooking the city. I was twisting my hands together, knowing my nervousness was

undeniable. I wondered if it was like a neon sign above my head.

He'd been in prison for the last five years, serving time for being connected to an underground fight ring—amongst other things. He'd recently gotten out, and although it was a joyous reunion to have my eldest brother back, things had gone back to "normal" instantly.

And by normal, I meant Dmitry and Nikolai running the Desolation Bratva with iron fists, cold hearts, and vicious weapons.

Well, things were normal aside from a stark difference in Dmitry, one I couldn't place, and one I knew didn't have anything to do with him being in prison. I just didn't know what it was, but it… changed him in some way.

As if hearing or reading my thoughts, Dmitry looked over his shoulder at me and gave me a once-over. His expression remained stoic. I knew I didn't have to say one word for him to know everything I was thinking and feeling.

A muscle in his jaw ticked as his gaze landed on my throat and then again as he dragged his focus up to my eyes. Everything felt so swollen and achy, like someone had repeatedly punched me in the face.

Nikolai had yet to look up at me, but I could hear him playing a game on his phone. I knew he wasn't really interested in it but did it as a distraction so he wouldn't go out to destroy shit.

I could read my brothers as well as they could read me. I guess it was our Petrov blood.

I opened my mouth but didn't say a thing. I couldn't find the words to speak. It was then I heard the *click-clack* of nails coming toward us out of the kitchen. I watched as Dmitry's Doberman, Sasha, trotted over to me. She sat beside my feet, and I instantly crouched, wrapping an arm around her back and pulling her in close.

I instantly felt calm as she nuzzled against me, sensing my unease.

"Прежде всего…" *First off…* Dmitry's voice was dangerously low and his words even. "Мы поговорим о том, где ты была всю ночь." *We're going to talk about where you were all night.*

I stayed crouched as I stared at my big brother. It was then I felt a prickling wave settle over me and knew Nikolai had also turned his full attention on me. I dragged my gaze from Dmitry to stare at him, the man whom I'd heard through the rumor mill once took sadistic pleasure in tearing the finger and toenails off a man for cutting him off in traffic.

There was menace radiating off Nikolai to the point that Sasha growled and moved her body to position it in front of me.

“Кто, черт возьми, сделал это с твоим чертовым лицом, Тати?” *Who the hell did that to your fucking face, Tati?* He stood and tossed his phone onto the coffee table with a loud *clang* against the glass.

He moved a step forward, and Sasha took a threatening stance. I watched as she lowered her head and growled more aggressively.

“I don’t want to talk about this right now.” My voice was harsh, scratchy, and fuck did it hurt to speak. Keeping my eyes on Sasha, I didn’t look at my brothers to see their reaction. I knew they would be livid.

The big, black-and-brown beast growled again, and I finally glanced at my siblings.

Nikolai’s jaw clenched as he stared at the Doberman. “Дмитрий, контролируй Сашу, чтобы мы во всем этом разобрались.” *Dmitry, get Sasha under control, so we can figure this shit out.*

While she *had* stayed at his house while our brother was in jail, Sasha was actually attached to Amara, not Nikolai. I’d laughed many times in the past five years, as I watched the protective dog take this same stance in front of my sister-in-law when her husband got too bossy or hotheaded.

“Саша, приди.” *Sasha, come.* Dmitry’s voice was firm.

I felt Sasha’s muscular body tense, as if she wanted to go to her owner but also wanted to stay next to me and protect me from the “threat” she deemed immediate.

“чёрт возьми, Саша.” *For fuck’s sake, Sasha*, Nikolai snapped. “Она моя сестра. Я не собираюсь причинять ей боль.” *She’s my sister. I’m not going to hurt her.*

Sasha moved toward Dmitry then, as if she understood what Nikolai said. But I could see how contracted her muscles were under her sleek, dark coat as she sat beside one man but kept a laser-focused eye on the other.

No one spoke for long seconds, and then Dmitry exhaled and ran a hand over his short hair.

Nikolai stared at Sasha for a second, his jaw clenched tightly as he ground his molars. Finally, he huffed out a curse and walked toward me.

I noticed Dmitry petting Sasha, probably to keep her in line so she didn’t lunge toward us. I pulled back my shoulders and stood to look my brother in the eye, albeit about a foot higher than my own, wanting him to see that although my appearance was no doubt shocking, I wasn’t weak. I

wouldn’t—not even in the face of my brothers’ protective wrath—be intimidated.

“I’m tired,” I whispered, but I still didn’t sound like myself. It hurt to even breathe, let alone force words out of my mouth.

Maybe it was the look in my eyes or the hard set of my face as I glanced between my brothers, but I saw this… almost resignation cover Dmitry’s face, as if he knew I wouldn’t budge on this.

“I’m just as stubborn as the two of you,” I muttered under my breath in English, my skull pounding from a massive headache and my entire face feeling like it had been run over with a semi.

Dmitry chuckled, and Nikolai cut him a scathing look.

Although both of the men were hardcore in everything they did in life, out of the two of them, Nikolai was the legitimate sociopath. And right now—as I stared into his wild-looking eyes—I could see the only thing on his mind was vengeance.

Before I knew it, Nikolai was standing mere inches from me, his breathing increasing the longer we stared at each other.

“Даже если ты не расскажешь нам, кто это с тобой сделал, Татти…” *Even if you don’t tell us who did that to you, Tati…* Nikolai ground the words out from between his clenched teeth. “Ты чертовски хорошо знаешь, что мы собираемся выяснить, кто это был.” *You know damn well we’re going to fucking find out who it was.*

Yeah… I knew that, but that was a problem to worry about at another time.

“Maybe, brother,” I whispered. “But not right now. Not today.”

Nikolai looked crazed as he glared at me. I glanced down to see his hands curled into tight fists at his sides, his knuckles cracking as if he were preparing for any chance to destroy something.

Although my brothers were very protective over me, this wasn’t just about that. Dmitry and Nikolai had a darkness within them that made it impossible for them to live normal lives.

They needed an outlet for all the aggression, destruction, and violence they housed.

They needed something to tame whatever demonic creature they had inside each of them.

It was the same as the one our father had. It was as if the very devil himself possessed all of them, and that bastard was starved for another bite

of human flesh.

But the difference between my brothers and our psychotic father was that they would never hurt the ones they loved.

They'd rather die slow and torturous deaths than cause the ones they held close any sort of pain.

"*Please*," I said finally, and I reached out to take one of Nikolai's hands in mine. After a second, he relaxed enough to hold it within his much larger one, but I could see how tense he was.

In my mind, I saw flashes of Gio's massive, tattooed body hovering over mine as he crowded me by his front door. I thought about how he killed that man so effortlessly, as if he were just taking his next breath.

God, he'd been ruthless and brutal.

To save me. To protect me.

And it was clear it hadn't affected him while he sat in his kitchen and drank his coffee. He acted like it was just another day and he hadn't murdered someone.

Or more like murdering someone was a simple, everyday task he did, right along with getting dressed and brushing his teeth.

"I'm so tired," I whispered, and I saw Dmitry move closer so he was standing just a foot behind Nikolai. "I just want to sleep. I just want to…." I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, my throat burning. I kept my expression neutral, so they wouldn't see how much pain I was in.

"Tati." Nikolai's voice was deep and low, and when I looked at him, I could see how he scanned my face with his all-seeing eyes, his expression so worried.

"I know I can't run from this conversation, but can we shelve it for right now? Can we talk about it later?"

There was a war waging on my brothers' faces, as they clearly wanted to fight me on this, but after a second, Nikolai nodded. "I'll call for a car to bring Amara."

The way he spoke told me there was no point in arguing. I let go of his hand and took a step back, expecting them to move toward the front door, but Nikolai made himself comfortable on my couch.

Dmitry moved toward the front door but looked at me. "We aren't leaving," he said, his voice firm.

I didn't argue or tell them to go. I knew they needed to be here for me—and for themselves. I felt a cold, wet nudge against my hand and glanced

down to see Sasha by my side.

“Go rest, little sister.”

I nodded at Nikolai’s softly spoken command but kept my focus on Sasha.

“I’m bringing the doctor too.” Dmitry’s tone was flat, as if he knew I wouldn't say shit about it.

And I wouldn’t.

I just gave another nod because I wasn’t stupid. I knew Gio probably had someone look at my injuries from the fact that I had an IV in my arm when I woke up. But even though I felt mostly okay—sore as fuck, but alive—I wasn’t senseless enough to think I shouldn’t be seen by my brothers’ doctor.

Dmitry and Nikolai shared a look, one that was this silent communication I’d never understood. And then Dmitry grabbed his cell out of his pocket and opened the front door to run his quick errand.

I stood there in silence as Sasha kept nudging me and felt the heavy weight of Nikolai’s lethal stare on me.

I hadn’t felt so… helpless since my father had been murdered.

Good riddance to that piece of shit. I hope he’s burning over and over again in the fiery pits of hell.

“I’m going to shower and then lie down.”

Nikolai said nothing in response, but I knew he was still looking at me. I felt his gaze like a hot poker branding my face.

Plus, asking them to leave for the night wouldn’t have done any good. When my brothers decided on something, nothing could make them deviate from their paths.

So I didn’t say another word and headed to my room, locked myself and Sasha in, leaned against the door, and just… breathed.

I gathered my conviction and pushed away from the door, grabbed a change of clothes, and went to the bathroom.

Sasha was insistent on coming in with me, and when I shut the bathroom door, she laid down in front of it with a heavy huff.

I turned on the faucet and let it get scalding hot. Steam filled the room in a matter of minutes. I stripped and slowly sank into the tub with a heavy sigh of my own. Sasha huffed out again, and I glanced over at her.

“It was one of those nights for me too, girl.” I peered up at the bathroom vanity and the large mirror above it, having purposely not looked at my

reflection when I passed it on my way to the tub. I was afraid to see what I looked like… what my own stupidity did to me.

Don't you dare blame yourself.

Maybe I shouldn't have gone to the fight. But it wasn't my fault this shit happened. It was *not* my fault I got hurt, and the world now had one less motherfucker to worry about.

I sank lower in the tub, a painful tightness in my arms and legs setting in as soon as I was submerged. But it felt good. I liked that flash of discomfort telling me I was alive. I was safe.

As much as I didn't want to replay the previous night's events, they ran through my mind like a movie reel.

The hand on my throat getting tighter and tighter.

The feeling of the air getting pulled from my lungs.

That darkness creeping in….

I sat up with a gasp, this time welcoming the pain the deep breath caused, and scrubbed my body, my flesh burning the harder I ran the loofah over my arms and legs. I took a washrag next and scrubbed my face and neck, gasping quietly, as the pain was intense, but I couldn't stop.

Eventually, when I couldn't take any more, and too weak to continue if I could've, I pulled the plug, got out, wrapped a towel around my body, and then faced the foggy mirror. My hand was shaking as I ran my palm over the glass, smearing the condensation so I could see the blurry visage of myself.

My reflection wasn't clear, but the longer I stood there and the tub emptied, the more the steam dissipated and the room cleared, showing me the monster I appeared to be.

What my brothers had seen.

And what caused a full-on sociopath to feel—and even *look*—worried.

A hard gasp left me as I took in my eyes, the broken vessels looking like someone splattered blood across the whites. My left was worse than my right, and I ran a finger gently along my cheekbone.

I blinked tears away.

My face and upper chest had small red and purple dots covering it, almost like grisly little freckles. And my throat? God. My throat was also red and purple and would no doubt get darker with each passing hour. I ran my fingers along the large, very clear, bluish thumbprint on the right side of my throat, right over my pulse point.

Other fingerprint-sized bruises littered the left side of my throat, and a choked sound escaped me. I was sore, swollen and tender, and… I was fucking pissed. I clenched my teeth and exhaled, my breath coming out as this weird rattling noise.

"I'm glad he's dead," I whispered to my reflection. "I'm glad Gio fucking killed him like the worthless piece of shit he was." The tears were falling down my cheeks, but I didn't bother brushing them away.

And despite being so angry, I could feel my heart racing. I felt unwavering despair and fear fill me. It was a fear I hadn't felt since I was a little girl, hiding—metaphorically and literally—from my father's wrath.

I didn't know what I was afraid of, but I knew it *wasn't* Gio.

In fact, as I thought about him killing that man, then taking me back to his place and tending to me, I felt something powerful coursing through me.

I was afraid of what had happened to me. I was afraid of what would come if my brothers found out Gio was the one who intervened and helped.

There were so many things that could go wrong with Gio being the one who killed my attacker.

My brothers might see it as a betrayal that he hadn't contacted them right away and told them what happened. I was afraid that revealing Gio's involvement could escalate tensions between him and my brothers, potentially leading to a violent conflict or, God, even a war between the two factions. They might see Gio's actions as a challenge to their authority, or an infringement on their territory, which would then put Gio in great danger.

There were so many things rolling around in my head on what could—and would—go wrong if my brothers found out any of it.

I closed my eyes and pushed all that worry away so there was only one thing now claiming my thoughts.

Visions of Gio and… this heat I suddenly felt, which I wanted to feel more of.

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9

GIO

I scrubbed a hand over my face as I sat in my dimly lit office, the heavy wooden desk clean and organized because I hadn't been home in far too long.

I came back to the West Coast just days after the incident with Tatiana Petrov. It had nothing to do with me "running" from a problem I'd created for myself, though I knew I should have fucking walked away and let her handle her own shit by herself.

Truth be told, I had a marriage to arrange for Claudia, one she wasn't fucking going to take kindly to.

But hell, I couldn't think about that now either—not with so much on my damn mind.

Tatiana shouldn't have been at the fight to begin with, but fuck me, I'd seen her pressed against that wall being choked out, and something in me shifted and then snapped.

I'd left Desolation because I had business to handle here and an urgent phone call with Carmine, the Head of Italy.

And I needed to get far away from anything remotely related to Tatiana because I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her.

The faint scent of cigar smoke lingered in the air, and the flavor of whiskey coated my tongue.

I was staring out my office window when my cell rang, the burner phone reserved for only the most important calls.

Already knowing who it was, I ran my hand over my jaw, the scruff scraping along my palm. I answered and leaned back.

“Carmine,” I kept my voice even. Whenever Carmine Lucchesi called, it was never a good thing. He always wanted something, and that was usually to get someone else's hands dirty with blood. “It’s good to hear from you.” It wasn’t.

“Gio.” His voice was smooth, yet there was an underlying tension. “È così bello parlare di nuovo con te.” *It’s so nice to speak with you again.*

He was full of shit.

“What can I do for you?” I stood and poured myself another drink because I fucking knew I’d need it for this conversation.

“I have a matter of utmost importance that requires your immediate attention.”

I went back behind my desk and took a seat, a sense of foreboding settling over me. I took a long drink from my whiskey before I responded. “What do you need from me?”

I heard him inhale as if he too were smoking a cigar. “We have a problem in Desolation," Carmine began, then exhaled whatever smoke he’d just filled his lungs with. “A Russian mafia member, Maksim Volkov, has been causing us significant trouble.”

I sifted through my memory for an answer as to why that name sounded familiar. And then it clicked. He helped “clean up” messes with Arlo Malkovich, Ruin’s expert fixer. But Maksim wasn’t just some piss-on help boy. I knew he had a blood relation to a higher-up in the Bratva, which made taking him out even trickier.

“He's interfering with our operations and threatening our interests. He needs to be eliminated.”

I clenched my jaw. “Carmine, killing anyone in the Desolation Bratva will cause significant issues,” I told him, and he kept his fucking mouth shut. “You know my brother-in-law Nikolai and his brother Dmitry are heads of the Bratva there. Taking out Volkov could spark a war within my family, if it ever were revealed who took out one of their own.”

Carmine's tone hardened. “Believe me, I understand how delicate the situation is, Gio, but this is non-negotiable.”

I tossed back the rest of my whiskey and ran my hand back and forth over my head.

“Volkov needs to be eliminated.”

“What exactly has he done?” I asked because fuck if I wasn’t going to know exactly why someone close with the Bratva was getting slaughtered and my ass would be on the line for it.

Carmine's voice took on a steely edge. “Volkov has decided to work with some lowlifes because he's done being at the bottom of the hierarchy. He’s taken matters into his own hands to climb the ranks and has been encroaching on our territory.”

For fuck’s sake.

“He’s been siphoning off our profits from the drug and weapon trade shipments.”

Something in the way he said that made my neck tingle. Carmine was lying, but about which part, I didn’t know. And I didn’t know why he would.

“Because of his sloppiness and the giant set of balls he apparently has, he’s been linked to an orchestrated attack on one of our warehouses.”

Fuck. I knew exactly what attack Carmine meant because I had to deal with the fallout when I was in Desolation. I had to clean up three bodies that were tied to the Cosa Nostra, and we fucking lost a significant shipment to those bastards.

“And the men Volkov is dealing with also sent a clear message that they intend to expand their influence in Desolation at *our* expense. They are fucking out of control.”

“Let me talk to the Petrovs. I can have them look into this, since it deals with their men—”

“*We* fucking handle this.” Although his voice was steady and even, I heard the lethal intent laced within his words.

Motherfucker.

“If we don't stop him now, he'll continue to undermine our operations and destabilize our control.”

I ground my molars and asked between clenched teeth, “What exactly do you want me to do, Carmine?”

“Slaughter him,” he said without hesitation. “I want you to send a message. But this needs to be a clean job. No traces and no loose ends. I want it to look like an internal matter within the Bratva.”

I knew I shouldn’t have said what spewed from my mouth, but it was out before I could stop myself. “I can’t be involved. I can’t do the hit. This isn’t just a personal position I’m taking but one that keeps the Cosa Nostra

strong in Desolation and our alliance intact.” All I could think about was the blowback from the Petrovs. It would damage and destroy the bonds we’d worked so fucking hard to tie over the years.

Hell, Amara had been used as a pawn and bartered off to a sociopath to ensure this unity.

It didn’t matter if she loved and was loved by that insane motherfucker. She’d still been used to make an alliance, and I wouldn’t risk that, even if that meant going against what Carmine wanted.

Carmine was silent for long seconds, and I wondered if he was going to say goodbye and then order my own hit.

“You’ll figure it out, but I want it done swiftly, and I want it done now. Oh, and Gio?”

I clenched my hand into a tight fist as I waited for whatever order he was about to spew.

“Voglio che sia fatto con un tocco personale. Capito?” *I want it done with a personal touch. Understand?*

Yeah… I fucking understood. He wanted Maksim to suffer. I was curious as to why though. I got that this was an issue for the Cosa Nostra, but why was Carmine taking such a personal interest in this?

“Just make sure Volkov and the men he works with disappear without it coming back to us.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, weighing my options. I had sworn loyalty to Carmine and the Cosa Nostra, but my family ties with the Petrov Bratva complicated the matter. But Carmine approved the wedding, the familial link between the Bianchis and the Petrovs. He saw how those ties would strengthen us on the East Coast.

“Carmine, if I do this, it could have severe repercussions. Even if it’s not traced back to us, Dmitry and Nikolai won't take kindly to the mess this will cause.”

“You’re smart and discreet,” Carmine replied.

“And the Petrovs are clever. If this isn’t done correctly, they’ll find out what happened.” I seriously weighed just broaching this with Dmitry and Nikolai, but that would mean going behind Carmine's back.

“I’m confident you’ll ensure it can't be traced back to us nor the Cosa Nostra. This is why you’re one of my most trusted men.”

I sighed, knowing there was no easy way out. I’d either betray my brother-in-law or the Head of the Cosa Nostra.

I’d figure it out either way, but fuck was this putting me between a rock and a fucking hard place. “I'll take care of it, Carmine.”“You understand what this means?” I didn't respond. “It comes down to the *la famiglia*

and your loyalty.”

I ground my teeth again. “I won’t hesitate to do what needs to be done.”

“Bene. Mi metterò in contatto più tardi per assicurarmi che i miei ordini siano stati eseguiti.” *Good. I'll be in touch later to make sure my orders were followed through.*

The line went dead, and I set my cell back on the table, staring at it and feeling my irritation grow. To make matters worse, as soon as I wasn't preoccupied with other shit, Tatiana rolled right back into my thoughts.

The weight of my next move was heavy on my shoulders. My loyalty was being tested, being pulled from one side to the other.

Fuck, I didn’t want to hurt my sister by fucking things up—especially when I knew how happy she was, when I knew she was in love and finally found what she’d been looking for. I might’ve seen Nikolai as the sociopath he was, but he treated Amara like his fucking queen. He paved the ground in gold wherever my sister walked.

And he’d kill and dismember anyone who fucked with her.

Jesus Christ. I knew I had to navigate this fucked-up situation with precision, or the threat of more dead bodies and shit hitting the fan would land right in my lap.

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10

TATIANA

It had been a full week since the assault and waking up in Gio’s apartment. My bruises were fading, and my eyes and face were pretty much healed from the broken blood vessels and swelling.

And the entire time, I hadn't stopped thinking about that big, tattooed Italian mafia Capo who saved my life.

For the first couple of days, Dmitry and Nikolai had barely left me alone. They’d given me my one day of peace, quiet, and solitude I needed, but after that, they’d been persistent in wanting to know everything. What happened, who hurt me, and where the fuck had I been until I strolled through my front door that first day back?

There had been plenty of demands from my brothers and a hell of a lot of screaming by me through my bedroom door as I told them to leave me the hell alone.

I knew they were just trying to help, but they were used to getting what they wanted, and no one ever denied them. So me all but saying “go the fuck away” pissed them off and made the situation even worse.

They should have taken notes from Amara because my sister-in-law had given me space and not pressed. But I knew eventually—probably sooner rather than later—I wouldn’t be able to keep my silence.

I sat alone in my room, the dim light casting long shadows on the pastel-colored walls. My room was a sanctuary of sorts, one of the only

places I'd truly ever felt safe since being an adult. Growing up, I was filled with a lot of fear of the unknown because of my father.

I sat on the plush settee by the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the city, a thick blanket wrapped around me as I stared at the hustle and bustle below.

My mind replayed the traumatic events from last week. I heard every sound from that dilapidated slaughterhouse basement. I remembered and felt every touch from that bastard. God… I'd felt so helpless.

If I didn't find my center, I knew this entire event would be etched into my memory like a scar.

I closed my eyes and controlled my breathing, feeling myself calm and my memories fade to the back, when a loud knock on my bedroom door caused me to jump.

The knock was followed by Dmitry's hard and deep, unmistakable voice. And it was filled with obvious irritation. "Tatiana."

I could envision Dmitry saying my name through clenched teeth. I didn't answer right away, and he pounded again.

"Open the door. We're going to talk about this. Now," he demanded, his voice heavy with fury and… clear concern.

I knew my brothers loved me, but God, they could be so dominating and *irritating*.

I looked toward the door, the reality of the situation crashing down on me, because I knew my time was up.

I wasn't trying to protect the fucker who hurt me.

I'm protecting Gio.

There were hushed whispers on the other side, and I knew Amara, Nikolai's wife, was trying to talk her behemoth of a brother-in-law down from the damn ledge he was on right now.

Nikolai would only pour gasoline on that inferno.

Before I could respond, the door swung open, slamming against the wall, revealing Dmitry and Nikolai on the other side, and Amara looking frustrated as she stood right behind them.

My brothers' expressions were hard, their blue eyes blazing with intensity, and I felt a charge in the air.

I was going to suffocate. Again.

"Right here. Right now, Tatiana. You're going to tell us what happened," Dmitry growled, stepping into the room with Nikolai close

behind him.

I looked out the window, holding in angry tears.

“Tati, we need to know.”

I felt a sudden surge of tension and anxiety as I faced my brothers. Amara came into the room, her expression now worried and unsure.

I took a deep breath, knowing there was no turning back now, and there was no stopping this derailed train.

“Guys, maybe we should just take a breath and calm down,” Amara inserted softly, trying to diffuse the tension.

“*Kukolka,”* Nikolai said to his wife but still had his focus on me, “this has gone on long enough. Longer than we’d allow anyone else to withhold information from us.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not just anyone, *brother*,” I spat that last word out. “This is my problem and mine alone.”

A low rumble left both Dmitry and Nikolai. I knew my words were a lie. We were a family. My problem was theirs and vice versa.

“I think we can all agree Tatiana has been through enough. Maybe we should just take a step back and reevaluate the situa—”

Dmitry cut Amara’s words off with a grunt, and Nikolai gave him a warning glare. Dmitry looked at him and exhaled, muttering, “Извини.” *Sorry*. He tipped his head in respect to Amara. “Retaliation has to be met.”

“You’re our sister,” Nikolai addressed me, his voice sharp. “We have a right to know who hurt you.”

I met my brothers’ harsh gazes, seeing anguish and protectiveness reflected back.

I knew they wouldn't stop trying to find out the truth. They had their own dark code to abide by, and when someone hurt who they loved… death followed.

Gio may have saved me, but he also hadn’t come to my brothers. He hadn’t told them what happened, and with each passing day, my brothers would see that as a betrayal… among other things.

Gio was, after all, family.

“Just go,” Amara said with a hell of a lot of strength in her voice. “Give us a moment, okay?” She stared at her husband, giving him a look I was pretty sure no one else had ever dared to. “Boys, please.” Her voice sounded soft but held a note of pleading in her tone. “Just a few minutes, all

right? Pretty sure you two acting like barbarians isn’t helping or going to get you any answers.”

Dmitry and Nikolai stared at each other, their jaws clenched, their fists curling and relaxing. Finally, they huffed out a breath and left, shutting my bedroom door behind them louder than needed.

I held in my eyeroll as I stared at my sister-in-law, then looked back out the window.

My mind and body felt so raw and used from the emotional intensity of fighting with my brothers, dealing with the assault, and waging war with my thoughts concerning Gio.

Amara stayed quiet for long seconds, but I sensed her come closer. I took a shaky breath, trying to steady myself as the weight of the silence in the room grew and pressed down on me.

“Look at me,” she said softly.

I did as the woman requested and saw she had an expression on her face that was like a knife to my gut. I didn’t want nor need anyone to feel sorry for me.

Amara had such a soft and sweet demeanor. I could see why Nikolai loved her so much. I hoped Dmitry would find that someday soon.

Nikolai was a wild card. A stick of dynamite with barely a fuse. He was certifiably insane. A sociopath. But somehow, this woman had made him… love.

“How are you doing, Tatiana?” Amara asked gently, her voice a soothing balm that helped smooth out the frayed emotions coursing through me.

She moved to sit on the edge of my bed and watched me silently.

I managed a weak smile, actually grateful for her presence, because I felt her calmness wash over me. “I’m fine… despite my appearance and the fact that I’m crying like I can’t control myself.” I brushed away the wetness on my cheeks. “My brothers make me so angry. They are so—”

“Demanding and hardheaded,” Amara inserted with a small smile of her own. She snorted. “To say the least.”

I chuckled softly.

And then we sobered as I felt the conversation shift to what she really wanted to talk about.

“We've been so worried about you,” she confessed, her tone filled with empathy. “When we heard what happened….” She glanced down at her

hands, which she had twined together in her lap.

I too looked down at my hands, unable to meet her eye as I thought about last week. The memories were raw and scary and painful.

“It's okay,” she added softly. “You don't have to say anything until you're ready. I just wanted to be here with you and to let you know you're not alone.” She glanced at the door. “And to get the source of your current irritation away for a moment to give you breathing room.”

I exhaled and said, “I’m sure they are right outside the door, huffing and puffing like a couple of penned-up bulls.”

Both of us started chuckling.

“How is Luca?” I asked Amara. I missed my nephew, but I was glad she’d kept him away. The last thing I’d ever want was for that adorable little boy to be in the middle of this family warzone. The negative energy would have been too dark for his sweet, innocent soul.

Amara’s smile lit up as she thought about her precious son. “He’s wonderful. Rowdy and already causing issues—”

“Just like his father,” I cut in this time, and we laughed.

I knew I couldn't stall any longer in talking about my issues, so I decided to just get this shit over with. I took a deep breath, the knot in my chest loosening just a fraction. I knew they meant well, that they were here out of love and concern.

But the words, the act of recounting the nightmare out loud, felt like I would be reliving it. And I hadn’t realized until that moment that… thinking about it scared the fuck out of me more than anything else.

“We want to help,” Amara whispered, her voice breaking slightly. “But we need to know what happened, so we can figure out how.”

I nodded slowly, lifting my gaze to my sister-in-law. I swallowed hard, preparing myself to do this.

Amara placed her hand on mine. Her support moved through me.

The room suddenly felt charged with a tense anticipation of the words about to spew from my mouth.

“I was stupid as hell.” I covered my face with my hands and shook my head. “I went to one of those underground fights at the old slaughterhouse.” The silence felt even thicker, and I dropped my hands to look at her and see the judgment in her eyes.

But there was none.

So I took a big breath and just exposed my truth and bared my heart.

I talked about watching the fight, seeing a tattooed fighter destroy his opponent. I told her about the asshole who grabbed me, how I tried to leave, but then found myself assaulted in the empty storage room before I could.

And then I explained in grisly details about being choked, knowing that I was about to die, and wishing I made better decisions and listened to my brothers.

Because they never wanted me there. They only wanted to protect me.

Amara said nothing as I confessed it all and felt vulnerable doing so. She listened intently, her gaze never leaving my face.

“And then someone came and saved me. He… he killed the man who hurt me.” My voice faltered as I felt tears stream down my face before I knew I was even crying.

She pulled me into a gentle embrace, holding me close as she ran her hand up and down my back. I was sobbing now, these uncontrollable sobs that came out of nowhere and ones I couldn’t stop.

I couldn't hear what she said, but I knew she murmured words of comfort until I calmed.

“It's okay, Tatiana,” Amara whispered. “You’re safe now. He can't hurt you anymore.” She sounded choked up.

I thought of this woman as my sister, bound by blood and not just by marriage.

After a few moments, I pulled back, wiping my tears with the sleeve of my sweater, and gave her a sloppy smile.

“Do you know the man who helped you?”

I looked away, hoping she couldn’t tell I was lying like my brothers always did. “No. It was dark, and he wore a mask. I passed out, and when I woke up, I was alone. That’s when I came back home.”

Amara stared at me, and I could practically hear her thoughts. She knew I was lying. But, thank God, she didn’t press me for where I was after the assault… as in the apartment inside the warehouse-looking place my brothers had been en route to right before I hauled ass out of there.

It was clear Gio’s name wasn’t associated with that building because, if so, my brothers would have known already. My brothers had access to any information they wanted, so them not finding out about Gio’s involvement meant the Italian mafia boss had covered his tracks.

“Your brothers need to hear all of this,” Amara finally said, breaking the silence.

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “I know.”

The men were fiercely protective, and this news would undoubtedly ignite their anger and desire for retaliation for someone hurting me and going against the Petrovs.

Amara pulled her shoulders back and tipped her chin up. “I’ll be with you.” Her voice was firm. “When you're ready to tell them, I’ll be right there by your side.”

“Yeah,” I whispered again. I knew this was just the beginning of an endless road, one that I was sure would be messy as hell.

“Now, I guess it’s time I tell Dmitry and Nikolai.”

That should have been the only thing I was worried about—thinking about—but the thoughts and images in the forefront of my mind had to do with one thing only.

When I’d see Gio again.

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11

TATIANA

I sat on the edge of my bed, my hands clasped tightly in my lap.

God, why did the room feel so small with my brothers in here?

They stood a few feet in front of me, their expressions hard and unyielding. I took a deep breath because, dammit, I felt the weight of their concern and anger.

“Start from the beginning and tell us everything,” Dmitry said, his voice low and controlled, although his rage was undeniable.

I nodded because, truthfully, I knew this time had been coming. Better to get it done and over with.

I recapped everything, telling them the same story I told Amara. It was all the truth… aside from the part where I withheld Gio’s identity.

Nikolai's jaw was clenched as he listened silently. I noticed he kept his distance, leaning against the far wall with his arms crossed and his head cast low.

I could only imagine what he was thinking about.

All the ways he’d retaliate.

When I paused, in the middle of the part where that fucker’s hand wrapped around my throat, I felt the chill in the room intensify.

“And then?” Dmitry prompted, and I looked up as he took a step closer.

“I told him my brothers would kill him for touching me.”

Nikolai growled like some kind of feral animal, and Dmitry cracked his knuckles and rolled his head around on his neck.

I told them what he said. Word for word, his voice was burned into my memory.

“He said he had no loyalties to the Petrovs. Said it was time for your fall.” God, why was it getting harder to talk? “He said he’d start by unraveling the ‘Petrov princess’ until I was bloody and broken.”

And then there was a loud crash as Nikolai grabbed my dresser, lifted the entire thing off the ground, then slammed it down on its front side in a fit of rage. The solid cherry wood piece of furniture was now in shambles, my clothes everywhere, but all I could think was, *At least I decided against the mirror option.*

“For fuck’s sake!” Dmitry shouted and started cursing in Russian. “Черт побери, контролируй себя, брат. Вести себя как псих тебе не помогает и сильно пугает женщин.” *Damn it, control yourself, brother. Acting like a psycho isn't helping you, and it's scaring the women.*

I swallowed hard, my mind racing, and admitted the rest to them. I told them how I’d been choked and how Gio saved me. But I didn't give them his name.

Dmitry turned and faced me, his expression unreadable. And then he took another step forward, his presence overwhelming. “You don’t know who the fighter was?”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t think he was a fighter. He was probably just a groupie.” I shrugged, feeling like I sounded damned convincing, but my brothers were smart. They wouldn’t have gotten where they were without knowing how to read people without them saying a fucking word.

I looked up at them after realizing I was staring blindly out the window again.

I knew they would never stop worrying about me or wanting to keep me safe and protected. But I couldn't drag Gio into this. I wouldn't.

“That’s it. That's everything.” I shrugged, keeping my hands flat on my lap, because twisting my shirt, showing my nervousness, would tell them I was keeping shit from them.

You know they are probably already aware you're hiding the real *information.*

Nikolai came to stand beside Dmitry, and they started whispering, too quiet for me to hear what they were saying. Dmitry placed a hand on

Nikolai’s shoulder, as if to calm him, when our brother started becoming even more tense.

I knew the two of them would tear the city apart to find out the identity of the man who hurt me. I just hoped they wouldn't find out about Gio in the process.

As they left my room, I felt a chill settle over me. I had bought some time… but for how long? The truth had a way of coming out. In my world, that was just unquestionable.

And when all the information was finally laid out, the fallout would be devastating. Because I knew my brothers would see hiding information from them as a betrayal.

I’d scrape by because I was their sister and they loved me. But Gio? Gio would be up against my sociopathic brothers, and as strong as I now knew he was… I didn’t know if he was *that* strong.

But for right this moment, I had to keep Gio's involvement a secret, to protect him *and* myself.

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12

TATIANA

The moment my brothers left my apartment, I felt like I could finally breathe. Amara had convinced them to give me some space, and God, was I thankful for that.

Although, I knew their absence wouldn't last long. But for now, it was perfect because, after everything coming to light, I needed to see Gio.

Honestly? Desperation clawed at me, and I couldn't wait any longer. I felt raw and wounded in a way that was all mental and emotional. I had no idea why I thought Gio could help with that. In fact, seeing him would undoubtedly make things worse.

Yet, I was still going to see him.

I paced my room for a good twenty minutes before I gained the courage to actually leave. Because I knew Dmitry and Nikolai had likely left one of their men watching my place, I had to think about how the hell to get out without them knowing.

“This is so damn stupid,” I murmured to myself. But the truth was, this was probably the best time to sneak off. Dmitry and Nikolai were so focused on what I told them that they wouldn’t be obsessed with keeping an eye on me. But I probably only had tonight.

I grabbed a hoodie and pulled it over my head, hoping the disguise would help me slip past whoever was posted outside.

I looked out the peephole and saw the hallway was empty. Quietly, I slipped out of my apartment, moving cautiously. There were only two other

apartments on this floor, and since it was so late, the building was eerily silent. And because of that, every creak from my movements echoed down the hall.

I took the stairs instead of my usual exit, avoiding the chance of running into anyone who might be guarding the elevator doors in the lobby.

My heart was thundering when I reached the ground floor. With a steadying breath, I peered through the small window in the stairwell door and saw one of my brothers' men standing a few feet away, partially concealed by the thick shadows.

He leaned against the side of the building smoking a cigarette, and although he had a relaxed stance, I could see his gaze scanning the area with calculated precision.

Yeah… I needed to find another way out.

I stood there a second and wracked my brain for the best course of action.

The front was obviously not gonna happen, so I moved through the ground floor to the other back door of the building that opened onto a narrow alley.

I didn't see anyone as I looked up at the screen that hung from the ceiling that showed the alley was empty. There was a security camera mounted on the outside corner of the building. If there was a guard, he was out of sight, so this was extra tricky. But this was the only feasible place I could leave from.

The camera rotated in the opposite direction, and I made my move.

I pushed the door open slowly, wincing at the soft creak from the hinges. I held my breath as I slipped out and pressed myself to the brick wall. I felt like my eyes were moving back and forth at a rapid pace, taking in everything as I checked to see if there was another Bratva member standing guard.

And then, I heard muffled voices around the corner. Ten feet away. I bit my lip hard enough I felt a flash of pain.

The shadows stretched long in the dim light. I brought the hood tighter around my face, tugging the two strings by my neck, and walked briskly around the building to the side street.

Before I left my apartment, I used a ride-share app to call a car, knowing my brothers probably put a tracking device on my own vehicle.

They might have Gio’s address already, but I didn’t need them to be notified I left.

I only had to wait a few minutes before the car arrived. I climbed into the backseat, keeping my head down, and gave the driver Gio's address.

The ride felt like an eternity as the city rushed by all around me. My heart was pounding in my chest as I kept glancing out the window. I half-expected to see one of Dmitry or Nikolai's men tailing us.

But the streets remained empty, and after what felt like hours, we finally pulled up outside Gio's place.

I sat there a moment, just looking out the back passenger window, and stared up at the warehouse-style building. It didn’t look like it held apartments within, not with the industrial architecture of it.

After tipping the driver in the app, I climbed out of the car, casting one last glance around to double check I hadn't been followed.

God, this was scary, but an adrenaline rush was pushing me along the tracks of this roller coaster ride.

The night was shrouded in a thick, almost eerie silence.

My nerves were frayed, but my determination was strong as hell. The mounted silver intercom glinted at me like a beacon. There was only one button on the panel.

Gio’s, I was sure, even though his name wasn’t printed on the label.

I pressed it with a shaky finger.

I glanced up and saw a camera pointed right at me. After a long moment, which was so damn agonizing, there was a crackle through the speaker.

“You’re brave, little Russian doll.” Gio’s voice was deep and sounded strange. Slurred maybe?

Obviously, I wasn’t surprised he knew it was me. I looked at the security camera again and pushed my hood down, staring right into the lens. The little red light blinked back at me, like Gio himself was taunting me.

I said nothing, and after a prolonged pause, the door buzzed, and I pushed it open and hurried through it. Inside, there wasn’t anything but storage boxes lined up on the right, a couch and coffee table to the left, and another security camera mounted on the wall, facing the entrance.

There was the elevator I’d taken down from his place a week ago up ahead to my right, and a set of stairs straight in front of me.

I took the latter option two at a time. The stairs led to only one floor.

To one apartment.

When I stood in front of the heavy-looking door, I saw it was already open, the silvery brushed steel slightly ajar. I could sense nothing but silence and darkness beyond.

I relaxed my hands, which were tight fists at my side, and then pushed his door open, stepping over the threshold and closing it silently behind me.

It took long seconds for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. He didn't have curtains on his floor-to-ceiling windows, and the lights from the city cast across his apartment, creating this hazy glow.

And then I saw him. Gio. He sat on the couch with an arm slung over the back, his legs outstretched and slightly spread, a bottle of whiskey in his free hand. He said nothing as he brought the bottle to his mouth and took the longest damn drink I'd ever seen someone take without wincing.

"Lock the door," he said in a gravelly voice.

I did as he said, and the sound of the lock engaging had my heart jumping to my throat.

"I couldn't stay away," I admitted, finally speaking, although I didn't sound like myself. And the longer he stared at me silently, the more my heart raced for a different reason. "I told my brothers about everything." I swallowed, expecting Gio to be upset, but he just sat there and drank. "I didn't tell them about you though. That you're the one who saved my life."

"Why?"

I licked my lips and took a step closer but then froze and inhaled a deep breath. I didn't want to lie anymore. "Because they'd see it as a betrayal that you didn't let them know right away about what happened. They'd take it personally."

He pushed up off the couch and walked closer to me. I noticed the whiskey bottle was almost empty and wondered if it had been full when he started.

"You took an enormous risk coming here. Your brothers would kill me if they knew." He smirked, but I knew he didn't think this was funny.

"I don't want them to come after you. I don't want them to kill you." He was right in front of me now, and I stepped back, my back hitting the door. I thought about last week and being in this same position, when Gio was so close that all I could see and smell was him.

"Your brothers don't scare me, and they certainly aren't strong enough to kill me, but your concern for my well-being is cute, *bambolina*."

I tipped my head back and stared at his face. He brought the bottle up again and took a long pull from it, his gaze never leaving mine.

“They are crazy.” I loved my brothers, but the truth was the truth.

He stepped closer, crowding me. “Sono più pazzo.” *I’m crazier.*

I didn’t know what he said, but Gio had spoken with so much clear intent I knew whatever he uttered was the absolute truth, his wicked-ass grin causing my pussy to clench. “I had to see you,” I whispered, admitting what I should have kept to myself.

His eyes narrowed, his presence overwhelming.

I swallowed hard, feeling a shiver run down my spine when he didn’t respond.

Gio's jaw was clenched, and I swore we were in a stare-down, where it was this tug-of-war I didn’t know I was fighting.

And then in a sudden move that pulled a shocked gasp from me, Gio grabbed my wrist, hauling me forward. My body slammed into his before he took a step to press my body against the door once again, and I placed my palms on the rock-hard expanse of his male chest that was only covered by a thin, white t-shirt.

“This isn’t a game, *bambolina.”*

“Who said I was playing games?”

He leaned down so our lips were only inches apart. I smelled the alcohol on his warm breath, and I found it highly arousing. “Do you have any idea what would *actually* happen if your brothers found out you were here?”

I looked up at him, my head resting back on the front door. He was a dangerous man, a mafia boss who had no doubt seen and done things that would make most people run screaming. Hell, he’d killed for me… right in front of me.

There was something about Gio that drew me in, made me feel alive in a way I never had before. I’d never been touched or had sex. Hell, I’d never so much as kissed a boy while growing up.

Men had steered clear of me, at first because my father demanded I remain untouched for whomever he pawned me off to. And then, my brothers…. Everyone was too scared to even look at me, let alone talk to me.

“I know the risks,” I said softly.

God, was I really going to say what I was about to say?

Yes. It’s too late to turn back now.

“But being here is worth it.”

For a moment, Gio just stared at me, his grip on my wrist tight but not painful. Then, with a low growl, he released me and turned away, setting the whiskey on the counter and running a hand through his hair.

He murmured something low in Italian, but then spun to face me and said, “You drive me crazy, you know that?”

I pushed away from the door and took a step forward, my heart still in my throat.

“You're playing with fire, Tatiana. But, damn it, I can't stop thinking about you.”

Before I could react to his words, Gio closed the distance between us, his hands gripping either side of my neck, and pressed his thumbs lightly on my pulse points right below my ears.

My lips parted, and the breath slowly seeped out of me.

Gio stared into my eyes for a long moment, so long I felt something dark, explosive, and hot move between us.

“Mi fai perdere il controllo per la prima volta nella mia vita,” he told me, and seeing the look of confusion on my face, he explained in English, “You make me lose control for the first time in my life.”

And then he pulled me against him, his lips crashing down on mine, hard and demanding. I felt a surge of heat rush through me, and my panties were instantly wet. I’d never felt this tingling between my thighs, but it was so intense I had to clench my legs together.

I was frozen, stunned by his passion and demands. It was everything I wanted and everything I knew it would be.

I kissed him back with all I had, pouring every ounce of my longing and desire into that kiss. Despite this being my first kiss, the awkwardness and inexperience I expected to feel didn’t happen because he was in control, leading me as if it were a dance.

In that moment, nothing else mattered. Not my brothers. Not the danger that seemed to follow us wherever we went.

Nothing.

All that mattered was this moment with Gio and the way he made me feel—alive, desired, and safe.

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13

DMITRY

It was easy enough to find out who hurt Tatiana.

The Bratva had a fuck of a lot of informants and spies, and that shit ran deeper than blood in this city's underworld.

As soon as we left Tatiana’s—which we sure as fuck hadn’t wanted to, but we knew she needed some breathing room—we got to work weeding through the information.

I hated leaving my little sister, and I knew Nikolai did too. But we had guards stationed around her apartment; plus, she was emotionally drained and probably just wanted to sleep.

Besides, Nikolai and I were itching to kill someone or, at the very least, cause some hardcore destruction after what happened to Tatiana. If the fucker who hurt her was already dead, the next best thing would be taking out anyone close to him.

It would calm our bloodlust.

We only had to wait a couple of hours after sending word out before we got what the fuck we wanted. The man we’d been after had been easy enough to find. He was an addict, a junkie who had been spotted entering one of the many trap houses in Desolation.

We had our men pick him up and take his strung-out ass to one of our abandoned buildings on the outskirts of the city. The basement of the old printing company was cold and dark, and the air fucking reeked of mold,

age, and damp concrete. We all stood in silence, and I could hear the scuffling of rodents nearby.

Nikolai and I stood side-by-side, the room dark, and the portable lights we brought in casted long shadows on the walls.

Francis was a young man who was about a hundred pounds soaking fucking wet. He was bound to a rickety-ass chair, his face bloody from his clearly broken nose, and his slight form trembled.

“You or me, brother?” Nikolai prompted in a low, steady voice.

Although, outwardly, he appeared unaffected, cold, and keeping his shit together, I knew my brother better than anyone else. He wanted blood, and he wanted it now.

I stepped forward, feeling every part of me settle. I knew what had to be done, and then I knew what would happen afterward. This poor bastard was going to die tonight, and it was going to be slow and painful. For the simple fact that he knew the fucker who hurt Tatiana, his life would be forfeited.

It was the only way to make the message clear that no one fucks with the Petrovs.

I stood before Francis, and the scent of piss, blood, dirt, and excrement wafted up from him, making me shake my head in disgust.

The world wouldn’t miss this fucker.

“You know why you're here,” I said, my voice low and menacing. “You have information we need on the motherfucker who hurt our sister.”

Francis started trembling even harder and shook his head frantically, blood and sweat dripping down his face. “I swear I don't know anything.”

Nikolai let out a dark chuckle and stepped up next to me, so we were once again side-by-side. The glint of metal in my peripheral had me looking down at Nikolai’s hand. He wielded a blood-covered knife, his knuckles white as he held it in an iron grip.

“Doesn’t matter if you do or don’t,” Nikolai was the one to answer. “You’re dying a slow and painful death tonight regardless.”

I circled the chair, feeling like the predator I very much was, as he continued.

“Our sister Tatiana was attacked.” Nikolai ran the tip of the dull blade along the side of Francis’s head. “We want to know who did it. And you're going to tell us.”

Francis started crying even harder, and my impatience grew.

“I don't know shit, man. Please. I was getting high all night. I couldn't tell you what time or even day it was.”

I looked at Nikolai to see him grinning, his smile cold and devoid of any warmth. “You can tell us on your own, or I’ll get the information out of you the hard way. I know which route *I* want to go, but I promise it isn’t the one *you* want.”

Nikolai slid the knife down to the man’s carotid and pressed the blade in just enough it broke the skin and drew a thin line of blood.

I leaned in close, my mouth inches from Francis’s ear. My voice was low and filled with deadly intention. “You can cry and bleed and piss your pants all fucking night. We have all the time in the world to get the information out of you.”

Nikolai chuckled. “But *you* don't have all the time in the world. If I were you, I’d start talking.”

Francis sobbed harder, snot bubbling out of his nose. “W-What do you want to know?”

I gritted my teeth, my patience wearing thin. I grabbed a chunk of hair at the back of his head and yanked it. “Tell us about the fight last week. I know there have been rumors about Tatiana getting attacked and someone taking out the man who did it.”

“The lowlifes of Desolation can’t keep their fucking mouths shut,” Nikolai spat out.

Francis was quiet for a moment aside from the intermittent sounds of him sniffling. “Y-Yeah. Just shitheads talking. A new group coming up in their conversations. I didn’t pay any attention because, truthfully, I was tapping a vein and didn’t give a fu—”

Nikolai pressed the blade harder into his neck. “Last chance, motherfucker.”

Francis cried out and started stammering even more. “A-All I heard was that they… they c-call themselves The S-Stygian Syndicate, and… and… and the man who h-hurt your sister was p-p-part of th-their group.”

Nikolai dragged the knife away and stood to his full height, looking at me with a cocked eyebrow. “What kind of dumb fucking name is The Stygian Syndicate for a crime organization?”

“A group that will soon be buried in the underworld they derived their fucking name from.” I released my grip on Francis’s hair, and the piece of

shit’s head slumped forward, the ropes keeping his body upright in the chair. “Who was the douchebag who hurt her?”

Spit and blood dribbled out of his mouth. While we hadn’t punched him in the face—no matter how badly both of us craved to—our men roughed him up quite a bit while extracting him from the trap house, getting him here, and then binding him to his current seat.

“What does it matter now? He’s dead,” he mumbled.

So much for not punching him.

I slammed my fist into the back of his head, and he made a choking sound as the force caused the chair to crash forward. The spindly legs broke from the impact, the ropes loosening. But Francis was too injured to do much but squirm like the slimy worm he was.

“Q. His name was Q Rahman, and he was one of their enforcers.”

Nikolai clucked his tongue. “You've been very helpful, Francis.”

“Please. I don’t want to die.”

I stared at his arms when he rolled to his back, splintered wood all around him like some sort of broken, fucked-up frame. The crooks of his arms showed dirty track marks and countless scars.

“Your extracurricular activities say otherwise,” Nikolai replied, and I lifted my gaze to my brother, seeing him move behind the junkie, the knife still in his hand. He crouched and grabbed a chunk of Francis’s hair, yanking his head back so he was forced to look at Nikolai when he added, “In fact, we heard you’ve been drugging up some of the girls who walk the streets and using them in deplorable ways.”

Francis shook harder, the truth of those words becoming obvious by the terror in his expression.

“You know how we operate. We have to make an example of those involved. Can’t let anyone think they can look at us wrong, let alone make a move against us, without me slitting their throat in retaliation.”

I felt a smile spread across my face, listening to Nikolai. I knew it probably looked cruel and cold.

“And you’re the start of getting that message across.” My brother stared right at me, a grin cracking and spreading across his face as he brought that rusty blade across the junkie’s neck. His flesh opened up in a macabre gap where blood immediately poured out and spurted like a broken waterline.

The druggie’s screams sounded gargled and wet as he bled out, his blood spraying across Nikolai’s crisp, white button-down shirt.

He let Francis go and stood once again, handing the blade to one of our men who stood near the doorway.

“Clean up the mess after you’re done cutting him up. And then leave the pieces out on the street near where you picked him up, so everyone can fucking see what we do to motherfuckers who go against us.” I watched as blood made a dark pool along the dirt-covered floor.

“Make sure the head sits atop the pile of limbs and his torso,” Nikolai added, and I shook my head at his psychotic need to display that shit like a work of art.

After we left the warehouse, I met my brother at Sdat'sya, an establishment we owned. We sat at the bar, tossing back shots.

“Gotta find out more about this fucking rogue group.”

I nodded at what Nikolai said and tossed back another shot. “Yeah, no doubt. But we have to be smart. Can’t go off doing our own rogue shit and causing havoc, you hear me, brother?”

He snorted and looked at me. “Dmitry, you know damn well that's all we do… wreak havoc.”

As I stared at him, I felt my grin spread. “True that.” I nodded. “True fucking that,” I said, my voice cold and final.

Nikolai huffed in agreement. “They’ll all learn what it means to cross us.”

They sure fucking would.

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14

GIO

She was sweet and soft and everything I should have stayed away from.

But… I couldn't stop.

I kissed her like it was the last fucking thing I would ever do. I probed her mouth with my tongue, sweeping it inside the warm, wet, and soft confines of what I knew would be my addiction.

Irritation burned through me. I had no self-control where she was concerned. She shouldn't be here. It wasn't safe for her, and it would fucking complicate everything.

But Jesus Christ… I wouldn't tell her to go.

The fire I saw in her eyes mirrored my own turbulent emotions.

She moaned against my mouth, and I pushed her back harder against the door, her little body making a *thud* from my weight and the force of my desire.

My cock was a fucking steel pipe in my pants, my balls heavy like an anvil. I wanted to fuck her until she couldn't walk straight, until my nuts were drained dry and she was filled with me.

I felt this primal urge to fill her very *female* body with my cum until she was forever marked as mine. I wanted to leave a piece of myself deep inside her—a seed planted that would let everyone know who she belonged to.

That feeling was so monumental that I forced myself to break away, my breathing erratic, my cock throbbing.

“You shouldn’t have come,” I forced the words out roughly, though I couldn't stop looking at her slender, tight body. I couldn’t hide the fact that I wanted to fuck her until she whimpered and held on to me, until she begged me to go slower because I was *too much*.

“I know—”

“But now that you’re here….” I couldn't get the rest out because a harsh growl spilled from deep in my chest as I moved close to her again.

“Gio?”

I didn’t know what she saw in my expression, but her eyes widened, and her lips—red and swollen from my kisses—parted.

I pushed my body against hers once more and devoured her mouth with my own.

The only word to describe how I kissed her was *fiercely*. But my girl met my dark desire with an intensity of her own.

My girl.

I didn’t know why I thought of her like that, but there was no way I’d take it back. There wasn’t any fucking way I would talk myself down from this high she gave me. A high I’d never felt before—not even when I fought or took a motherfucker’s life.

Her hands gripped my shirt, and I felt the world narrowing down to just us. The rest of the universe be damned.

Minutes later, we broke apart, out of breath as we panted in sync.

“I—I don’t know what I’m feeling.” Her voice was soft and sounded hesitant, but it was filled with so much need that *I* would be the *only* one filling it.

I’d be the only one who ever saw the way she looked right now.

Pupils dilated.

Lips red and swollen and glossy from me mouth-fucking her.

I bet her little nipples were hard and totally fucking visible if I were to take a step back, but I didn’t want to move from where I was flush against her.

I growled low. I bet her tight little pussy was soaked for me, all primed for my big, Italian cock.

I wanted to wrap my hand around her throat in an act of possessiveness, but the trauma she’d gone through and her healing injuries had me curling my hands into tight fists. Instead, I leaned down and kissed her neck softly, gently, in a way I never had before with another living soul.

“You make me crazy, girl,” I muttered, my voice rough as I stared at her mouth. I pulled her into another kiss, this one slower but no less intense.

I had to get her naked.

I let my hands do the leading as I slid them down, then up under her hoodie, lifting it over her head and tossing it aside. She had a little white T-shirt on, but I needed to feel her… smell her bare skin and taste the sweat that would cover her flesh when she got worked up.

“Such a good girl for me,” I murmured against her lips and broke away to kiss her jawline, then down her throat. I licked her pulse that beat wildly beneath her ear. God, she tasted incredible and smelled so good. Sweet, like cotton candy. “La mia piccola bambola Russa.” *My little Russian doll.*

She shivered beneath my touch as I traced her lower back, pushing up her shirt so I could reach more skin.

I moved my hands back up and framed her face, plunging my tongue into her mouth and forcing her to take all of me.

Tatiana wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me closer as she rose on her toes and pressed her petite, firm breasts against my chest.

There was no tenderness in my touches or kisses now. I couldn’t control myself to save my life, now that she surrounded me in all that was her. I didn't have the strength to do anything but allow my instincts to rule and take what I wanted.

Her.

I was raw, primal. A motherfucker full of dark intent.

I didn’t care that a war would ignite with her brothers by being with the Petrov princess. I didn't care because they didn’t frighten me.

I was just as powerful.

Just as dangerous.

“You make me feel so good,” she moaned and ran her hand up and down my chest. “You make me feel so… safe.”

She started breathing harder, and I stepped back, reaching for the whiskey bottle I’d set aside, and took a long pull from it.

“Take your shirt off,” I said and pointed the bottle at her like she needed more direction on what I wanted her to do. “Show me those tight, little tits. I want to see what I’ll be worshiping soon enough.”

I wasn’t going to fuck her. Not tonight. This was just the beginning of a slow and thorough seduction of Tatiana Petrov.

I patiently waited as I took another sip of whiskey, my throat nice and numb so there wasn't a burn. Just smoothness.

"You want me to make you feel good?" I asked when she didn't follow my order, but I could see she was scared… just not of me.

She ran that cute, little red tongue over her lips. "You're already making me feel good."

God. Why did that make my chest ache?

"Fuck, sweetheart. You're such a good girl, saying all the right things. Now do as I say."

Her hands trembled as she took hold of the hem of her shirt and lifted it slowly. When her midriff was bare, she hesitated and looked at me.

I said nothing, my body tense, but it was from the fucking excitement I felt about all the devious things I'd do to her. Starting with eating out that no-doubt pretty pussy as soon as I got her naked.

"Faster," I gritted out when she still didn't move, not hiding my growing irritation that she wasn't obeying me fast enough.

I saw the fiery resolve in her eyes as she finally lifted her shirt and pulled it off over her head, tossing it aside. Her breasts were small but pert, her nipples a dark-reddish shade and so fucking hard my mouth watered to taste them.

I took another drink before saying, "Now the pants. Lose them because I'm about to bury my face between your thighs, and they're in my way."

There was no way I wouldn't be jerking off to the sight of those perfect breasts later on, when I was alone and needed a quick "Tatiana fix."

Fuck, my cock's gonna be sore.

She moved her hands to the waistband of her panties and pants, but before she pushed them down, I told her to go slow. I wanted to fucking enjoy the show, now that I finally knew exactly what her tits looked like. I'd been imagining them for a week, and the reality was so much better than what my mind conjured.

When she was totally naked in front of me, I licked my lips at the sight of her pussy. She had a landing strip of dark, trimmed hair and was bare everywhere else. "Such a beautiful girl, Tatiana."

I couldn't take my focus off her pretty, feminine slit and how her lips were so glossy, small beads of her desire already dripped down her inner thighs.

My cock was like granite as she shifted, her nervousness evident. The sleek lines of her legs turned me on, so much I grabbed my cock through my pants.

Her eyes widened in shock as she watched me touch myself, making me feel deviant in the best way. Could she see how big I was? Did she know it would hurt when I shoved it deep into her cunt?

I could have come in my slacks from the sight of her expression alone.

To want her the way I did, to want to own her, to claim and defile my girl, made no fucking sense.

I kept myself in control at *all* times. But here was Tatiana—someone totally off-limits to me —and my control went right out the damn window. As well as my sanity.

Her very presence threatened to unravel my restraint.

“Spread your legs wider. I want to see your pussy lips part.”

My cock throbbed, my balls ached, and that feeling only got worse as I looked at her cunt when she did what I said. I could see she was likely as turned on as I was, her lips not only glossy but also plump from her arousal.

I bet she was getting wetter from my orders. Tatiana was a Submissive as much as I was a Dominant.

“Sei la cosa più bella che abbia mai visto.” *You're the prettiest thing I've ever seen.*

I couldn’t stay away any longer. I set aside the whiskey bottle and was on her a second later.

I leaned in, dragging my tongue along her jawline, over her lips, and licked her nice and slow. Thorough.

“You’re trembling, little girl,” I whisper-groaned against her mouth as I kept my lips pressed to hers, not kissing her, just letting her know I could if I fucking wanted to.

“You make me feel things I’ve never felt before,” she whispered back.

I closed my eyes and gathered my control.

Same, pretty Tatiana.

“And…” She hesitated. “I’ve never done anything like this before. Not… *anything*.” That last part was so low I wondered if she meant to say it out loud.

I wasn’t surprised she was a virgin or had never been touched by a man. It was the same with my sisters. Well, only Claudia now. Amara was married to Tatiana’s brother, so she was no longer untouched.

Knowing my girl would only know my touch had my cock a leaky fucking mess with pre-cum.

Towering over her, I pressed my fully clothed body against her naked one, forcing her against the door once more. I was panting, the harsh sounds an audible truth of how much I was losing my grip on my decision to not take her completely.

“I want you to ask me to lick that untouched pussy of yours. I want to hear you beg me for my mouth on your cunt, to lick and suck you until you come all over my face.” I knew because she was so inexperienced that saying these things would embarrass her.

I wanted her to be on edge. Her uncertainty about it, about saying such dirty and lewd things, turned me the fuck on.

She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen in my life, but it was hard to not leave her safe and sound in my apartment and go fucking kill something because her healing marks were pissing me off.

The monster wanted out, wanted more blood to avenge Tatiana.

Her lips parted as she sucked in air, and I watched them closely to memorize what they looked like when or if she was about to do what I asked. She wrapped her hands around my biceps, pulling me in closer, digging her nails into my flesh until I hissed, and my cock jerked.

I ground my erection against her belly, rolling my hips back and forth until I had to ease up or I’d come.

Adrenaline rushed through my veins, and I grew high from it...and her. This feeling was better than fucking fighting, getting my hands dirty and bloody, or even killing someone.

Touching her felt better than unleashing my monster.

I had a filthy fucking need for this too young, far too innocent, and totally off-limits woman in my arms. But I also had no way of stopping myself.

So here we were, and here *I* was… about to cross some heavily drawn lines.

I licked her lips and gently bit them. She moaned for me and pressed her perfect tits harder against my chest. God, she was little, petite yet curvy, especially compared to all my bulk.

“My good girl,” I purred and pulled back, knowing what I wanted to taste next.

I braced my hands on either side of her head and leaned down, caging her in and staring right into her eyes. “You’re mine.” Did she know how deeply those two words ran in me where she was concerned? I couldn’t explain it. I couldn’t deny it.

And I sure as fuck wasn’t going to waste my time trying, when I knew the effort would be useless.

My name was a breathy moan from her, as if she knew what this meant. All of it.

I let her see the monster within me flash inside my eyes a second before I gripped her waist and spun her around. The entire length of her body was now firmly pinned to the door, and I stepped back, drawing my gaze down the length of her spine, over her perfect, round little ass, and down her long, slender legs.

“Spread wider.” I breathed the words out roughly and used my foot between her tiny ones to gently, coaxingly, force her to do as I said.

A broken moan left her when I started palming her ass.

“You touch me so… gently.” She rested her forehead on the door as I dragged my tongue along her nape and lower, until I had the muscle pressed to the indent of her spine and was now sitting on my haunches.

“Solo con te.” *Only with you.*

I squeezed her ass for long seconds before spreading her cheeks. I didn’t need to ask if anyone had ever eaten out her pretty little pussy. I knew she was a virgin in every single way.

Fuck. That turned me on, knowing no motherfucker had ever had their grubby damn hands on what was mine.

“Such a perfect fucking ass.” I couldn’t help how my fingers dug into her soft skin before I pulled my hand back, then gave one cheek a light slap, mesmerized as she jumped a little, which made the plumpness jiggle. “Never been so hard in my fucking life.”

My hands were so big and tan, tattooed and roughened, a stark contrast against her flawless flesh. She was just so small and dainty that I felt like I’d break her in half.

I leaned in so my nose was close to her cunt and inhaled deeply. A primal growl left me at the scent of her. “I’m going to enjoy this,” I said low and deep, glancing up at her. Tatiana’s upper half was twisted just enough she could look down at me, her eyes wide, because she knew what I was about to do.

I spread her ass as wide as I could, and she trembled for me, goose bumps popping out over her skin and making her seem even more vulnerable.

I was a deviant.

I was all the dangerous things wrapped up in one man. And here she was, putty in my hands and letting me do whatever the fuck I wanted.

“Beg me for my mouth on this wet and pretty pink cunt, Tatiana.”

“I want all of you, Gio. It’s like fire inside me.” She was breathing harder now. “Боже, помоги мне, но я не могу держаться подальше от тебя.” *God help me, but I can't stay away from you.*

The way Russian rolled off her tongue had copious amounts of pre-cum spilling from the tip of my cock. “My sweet girl,” I said, my words muffled as I dragged my tongue through her sweet slit. “I’m going to break in this little virgin pussy with my tongue and lips. And after that—later, sweetheart—I’m going to fuck you and ruin you for all others.”

Moving backward on my knees, I then gripped her hips and jerked my Tatiana backward, her body folding forward, so her chest was more parallel with the floor and her glorious ass popped out.

“I’m going to suck on your pussy until you come.”

“О, Боже.” *Oh, God.*

“I’m going to get drunk on you, Tatiana. I’m already so fucking addicted.” And then I was making good on my promise as I sucked on her cunt. A whimper and mewl left her, and an animalistic sound ripped from the darkest, deepest primal part of me.

The more I dragged my tongue through her slit and pushed it into her pussy hole, the wetter she became until I had to lap up all that fucking sweetness or risk losing it.

I fucked her with my mouth and sucked on her clit, my fingers teasing her opening and spreading her lips wide so I could really get in there with my tongue.

I pulled back, and she moaned my name as she instinctively followed to grind that sweet little cunt all over my mouth, smearing her cream along my cheeks and chin. I wanted that nectar covering me.

“Jesus Christ, Tatiana. You’re so fucking hot. Keep rubbing your soaked cunt all over my face.”

And my girl did just that. I squeezed her ass cheeks hard as I ate her out like she was my last fucking meal. I was going to gorge myself on her, then

die a happy man.

“Tell me who owns this pussy, Tatiana. Tell me who owns *you*.” I swatted her ass to make my point clear, to let her know there was only one right answer.

“I don’t need to say it for you to know.”

I looked around her ass, and at the same time, she glanced upside down at me from her bent-over position. Our eyes locked; one of my brows lifted in expectation.

“You. Only you. Always you, Gio,” she whispered obediently.

“Daddy’s good girl.” The words spilled from me before I could stop them, but she moaned as if hearing me say them turned her on even more.

Time to get my girl off and see how much sweeter she was deep inside.

I dragged my tongue through her slit and groaned. “Your first orgasm will be with my mouth. Your next will be with my big, fat cock wedged in your tight little cunt.” I latched my lips around her clit, and as soon as I started sucking, her legs shook.

She was close. She wanted—probably fucking needed—to get off.

“Tell me what you want, my pretty Russian princess.” I pulled my head back and smacked her ass, definitely not as hard as I wanted to, but once she was fully healed, I’d give her all I had to offer.

I knew she could handle it.

“I want—”

Smack!

Smack!

I ran my hand over her cheeks and watched her creamy skin turn pink from my spanks.

“I want…” she moaned, her words getting cut off again as I slipped my fingers between her legs and played with her soaking wet pussy. “I want you to take me over the edge.” Tatiana’s eyes were hooded as I glanced around her hip again, her blush spreading across her face. “I want you to make me come for the first time, Gio.”

I groaned, having never heard a string of words that turned me on so much.

I teased her opening with my tongue, then pushed a finger deep inside her, twisting my hand so my thumb could press to her clit.

I leaned to the side and stared at her face to gauge her reaction. She had her eyes closed, her lips parted, and her breathing was frenzied. I tried to be

gentle, knowing this was her first time experiencing any sort of penetration, but I was a beast and starving for her sweet pussy.

And then I worked my girl over until her legs trembled and she bent even farther, popping her ass out and giving me what I wanted.

She came like the good girl she was, her cum slipping from her pussy and dripping down my hand. I stood but didn't remove my finger, bending over her back until my mouth was by her ear. With my breathing erratic, I panted, "I'll be the only one you feel this way with."

As she came down from her high, I slowly pumped my finger into her again and gently rubbed her clit.

"Gio," she said on a breathy moan, standing back up and turning to face me. And then she curled into me, as if she needed me to give her strength to replace the weakness she felt after her first orgasm, her legs still shaky.

"La mia bellissima ragazza. Ora sei per sempre mia." *My beautiful girl. Now you are forever mine.*

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15

GIO

As the door clicked shut behind Tatiana, a heavy silence filled the apartment.

She’d stayed for an hour after I’d gotten her off, after she covered my lips with her sweet cream, and after she ground that tight, little cunt on my face.

I was still so fucking hard, and I hadn't tried to get off. In fact, I wasn’t going to until I shoved my long, thick cock deep into her virgin pussy.

A sick part of me wanted her brothers to find out, just so I could kick their ass and stake my claim on Tatiana. They were big, mean, and strong motherfuckers. But I fought dirty in the underground, and the thought of taking them on got my blood pumping.

I stood there staring at the door, my mind a violent storm of emotions. I didn’t have time to fight out the arousal and need coursing through my veins. Not tonight, at least.

Tonight, I had to take a life. The one Carmine wanted wiped out specifically.

There was something strange about the entire situation. My instincts were telling me there was a hell of a lot more to the story than what the Head of Italy was divulging.

But right now, that wasn’t something I’d push back on.

I ran a hand through my hair, letting out a low, frustrated growl.

As soon as I pushed work out of my head, images of my gorgeous little Russian popped in.

Tatiana was like a drug, one that I was hopelessly addicted to.

I walked over to the window and stared out into the darkness. I wanted to see her slipping away into the night, but all I saw was a quiet city with empty streets.

I'd spent my entire fucking life trying to make sense of this world and who and, more importantly, *what* I was.

A monster, a dark voice whispered inside my head.

The world I lived in was filled with violence and betrayal. It was a never-ending cycle I was so accustomed to I didn't think I'd ever know any different.

And fuck, but I was good at navigating that kind of fucked-up world.

I was ruthless and calculating, but most importantly, I was always one step ahead of everyone else.

And then there was my girl. She was something I'd never expected.

Tatiana drove me crazy in ways I loved and hated. Her fearlessness pissed me off because it put her in danger, but the fact that she was so determined to do whatever the hell she wanted had my cock harder than granite.

She knew I was a killer. She'd witnessed it firsthand. Her unrelenting fear and desire for me made me want her more than I'd ever wanted anything else.

It was as if she saw me as something more than the cold-hearted, bloodthirsty killer I was. And, fucking hell, that made me want her in a way that consumed the fuck out of me.

Tatiana Petrov could very well have been the most dangerous thing I'd ever faced in my life.

But dammit all to hell… I couldn't stay away.

I turned away from the window and clenched my hands into vicious, painful fists.

My breathing was becoming frantic, so I closed my eyes and steadied myself. I had never been the type of man to let emotions impede me. In fact, I didn't feel shit, not unless I was making sure my family was safe and protected or keeping my empire whole and on top.

I was cold and always fucking calculating. I hadn't been weak since I was a child and my father was beating the shit out of me. Yet, here I was,

questioning everything. And it was because of a little Russian goddess who was the most beautiful creature I'd seen in my life.

One thing was certain: I couldn't keep myself from her. Not now. Not ever.

But for now, I had to focus on one other thing, tunneling my vision and thoughts until they were only on that one task.

What I had to do tonight.

With a frustrated sigh, I grabbed the whiskey bottle and took a hearty swig from it, the amber liquid burning as it slid down to my gut, since I was no longer numb after tasting my sweet girl. She was like an elixir, her presence instantly sobering, bringing me into the light even while we played in the dark.

I downed the rest of the bottle, tossed it in the trash can, and headed to the bedroom to get ready.

I knew where Maksim was and how long he was going to be there. I knew how many fuckers I had to take out to get to him.

And tonight, I'd once again be the killer Tatiana had seen just a week ago.

I would be starting a war within our family if it was found out that I was the one who ended up intervening with Tatiana without telling her brothers… and soon, that I was the one who slaughtered Maksim.

Fuck.

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16

GIO

It was three in the morning.

The perfect time to murder someone.

I'd parked a block away in an old beater truck I'd taken from one of the auto body shops I owned in New York. The shittier the car, the less notice I'd draw.

Every streetlamp was either burned out or barely casted a muted-yellow glow along the deserted alleyways and sidewalks of Desolation.

I saw the occasional tweaker or junkie stumbling around, mumbling to themselves before moving on to find their next fix.

I was in killer mode, with Carmine's orders echoing in my head.

One of my men told me Maksim and two other Bratva members were at an old warehouse on the outskirts of the city. My source said they'd gotten an arms shipment in and would be there for the next three hours as they inventoried their delivery and set up distribution.

When I saw the warehouse, I checked the two weapons I brought with me one last time and focused myself even more. The chamber of the gun was ready, and I made sure the silencer was in place, sliding it into its custom holster at the small of my back, and covered it with my black jacket. My hunting knife was strapped in between my boot and ankle, hidden by my black pants.

I preferred the latter weapon because it was more personal, but tonight, I needed things to move quickly.

I kept to the shadows as I approached the warehouse, my senses on high alert, my breathing even, my heart rate steady. The dilapidated building loomed before me, its structure a decaying testament to another time.

There was a fucker manning the side door, and I moved through the darkness until I was right on the other side of the wall. I could hear each inhale and exhale as he smoked. I felt the beast rise within me, and a sinister grin spread across my face as I rounded the corner.

His eyes widened for only a second before he went for his gun. But I was already on him, my bare hand curled around his thick neck, his cigarette still between his lips but barely hanging on. He gasped and it fell to the ground. I stepped closer. The darkness wrapped itself around us as I inhaled deeply.

“You smell like sweat and fear.” He was a big bastard, but I was bigger. I tightened my hold on his throat, and he fought back. But he was no match, not when I was at my weakest, and certainly not now, when I felt the power of a hundred motherfuckers coursing through me.

“You see my face?” I asked low. “You see that I smile, even as you suffocate?” I cocked my head and watched him struggle for breath. “Pretty fucked up, huh?” When he went limp, I strangled him for another minute just to make sure… just to give the beast a little more for its hunger.

I let his body fall to the trash-covered ground and hauled him around the corner so he was out of sight. Then I slipped in through the side door, the hinges creaking as I pulled it shut behind me.

There weren’t any lights to guide my way, what with the warehouse long since closed up and unused. Age had created a broken, empty vessel made up of metal, cement, and memories.

I navigated the dimly lit corridor, my boots barely making any sound on the cracked and stained concrete floor.

I walked in the shadows for several minutes before I heard the muffled sound of voices. Their words were indistinct, but I could tell they spoke Russian. When I got to the end of the corridor, I pressed myself against the wall, adrenaline rushing through my veins, yet I kept myself outwardly calm.

I closed my eyes and focused on the conversation right around the corner. I knew what Maksim looked like, but recognizing his voice from those belonging to the other two men with him wasn’t something I could do blindly.

I leaned around the corner and saw Maksim standing in front of several large, wooden crates, presumably filled with their inventory of drugs and weapons, which included the newest shipment, as some of them hadn't been opened yet. There were portable lights set up around the three Russians as they cracked the tops and tossed them aside.

I focused on their words, my Russian fluent, so I clearly understood everything they said. They were discussing the current shipment, their tones low as they picked the items up out of the crates and examined them.

Maksim started speaking, and I memorized the sound of his voice in my head. Not that it would matter after tonight, since he wouldn't say another word again.

I took a deep breath and fully focused on the present. I needed to tame the beast. Let the monster know *I* was the one in control.

I had to isolate Maksim, and that meant taking out the two fuckers with him.

Shit, this was such a bad situation. I didn't feel any kind of remorse or regret or even fear. But I did feel *something* over the fact that if Dmitry and Nikolai knew I was the one pulling the trigger—hell, if they knew *anyone* in the Cosa Nostra had a hand in it—then the full wrath of the Bratva would rain down on all our heads.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked around the corner. This shithole didn't have any cameras, not even with their shipment of guns that would make anyone who happened upon them a hefty amount. And the only witnesses who could name me in this situation would soon be dead.

With my gun in hand, I lifted my arm, pressed my wrist to the wall to keep it steady, and knew I only had seconds to take the other two out before Maksim could react.

This is it, motherfuckers.

I pulled the trigger, and the first man went down as I was putting a bullet through the other fucker's head a second later. Both men were on the ground before Maksim even shouted and spun around. He was still fumbling for his gun as I rounded the corner and came up on him.

It was clear Maksim wasn't used to this shit, as his hands shook, and he tried to get his vision to focus enough to make me out. But I was like a shadow as I slammed my body into his, his back cracking and bending awkwardly as he crashed against the crate.

“W-What the fuck?” Maksim stuttered out, his eyes wide, the sight and stench of fear pouring off him.

I was taken aback for a second when I saw how frightened he was. This wasn’t some dangerous Bratva member. Oh, he was connected to the Russian mafia, but he sure as fuck shouldn’t have even been on Carmine’s radar. This little shit was weak and, hell, couldn't even hold a gun correctly.

“You’re making a huge mistake,” Maksim spat out. “Do you know who I work for?”

I let my smile spread across my face but said nothing. Instead, I pressed the gun under his chin, forcing his head to tilt back.

“They are gonna skin you alive, fucker. The Stygian Syndicate doesn’t show any fucking mercy.”

That had me freezing, and I cocked my head to the side, curious to hear more but knowing I didn’t have time for this shit.

“They are gonna take over Desolation, the Ruin…. Fuck, in time, they’ll take over the fucking world.”

I chuckled, Maksim’s fear making way for false bravado.

“Элиас узнает, и когда он это узнает, Стигиан получит полный контроль, а ты и

все остальные будут не более чем болонки.” *Elias will find out, and when he does, the Stygian will have full control, and you and everyone else will be nothing but lapdogs.*

Interesting.

I let him ramble. Who knew when I might need these details.

“Я должен был быть больше, чем это. У меня должна была быть власть.” *I was supposed to be much more than this. They were going to give me power.*

“Don’t worry,” I said in a low, deep voice. “When they come for me, I’ll let them know their pool boy Maksim told Gio everything right before I slaughter them.” My smile grew. “Di' al diavolo che gli ho detto che ci vedremo presto.” *Tell the devil I said I'll see him soon enough.*

Before Maksim could spout any more bullshit, I dug the weapon in under his chin and pulled the trigger. The gun delivered his death in near silence, and I stepped back, watching him collapse to the ground. A dark pool of blood from the hole at the top of his head spread beneath him.

I looked down at his lifeless body.

I felt no remorse.

This was my life. My world. Hell, this was fucking business.

Kill or be killed.

I only looked at the three bodies once more before turning and leaving the same way I'd entered. I heard something in the distance, a soft echo or maybe the patter of rodents' feet as they scurried across the rafters and ground.

I stopped and looked over my shoulder, my senses on high alert, adrenaline making me so fucking wired I felt like I could fly.

But it wasn't just about the kills tonight that made me feel this way. As I walked away, all I could think about was Tatiana. Her image consumed my thoughts, now that the job was done.

My obsession. That's what she is.

The images of her, the scent of her skin, and how soft she was against my mouth dug into my brain.

There was no fucking doubt in my mind that my fixation with her would fuck some major things up for me.

But shit… despite all that, she was mine, and I wanted her right fucking now.

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17

GIO

I left the warehouse feeling as if I was moving underwater, trying to push through the current and make sense of what I felt and everything that was going on.

I had one destination in mind, and I knew it was a bad fucking idea. But here I was… on my way to her.

The image of her pressed against my apartment door, surrendering to me, letting me own every single inch of her, was seared into my brain.

God, she drove me crazy. My addictions had always been of the underworld kind. Violence and death. Destruction and supremacy. But Tatiana? Innocent and sweet and willingly obedient? Yeah, she was the strongest addiction of my entire fucking existence.

My cock was hard as I thought about how she felt and tasted on my lips and tongue while I ate her out. And to say walking with a hard-on was uncomfortable was an understatement.

The city was a blur as I made my way toward her.

When I neared her apartment building, I kept to the alley across the street and scanned the perimeter. I could see a few men loitering along the murky, darkened corners. I didn't need verification to know they were her brothers' men.

I ran my hand over my jaw and looked down at my palm, seeing darkness smeared across my fingers.

Maksim’s blood. Some of it must have splattered on me when I killed him.

I wiped the blood from my hands onto my black cargo pants, the adrenaline still coursing through my veins. I stayed in the alley for twenty minutes, watching the routine of Tatiana’s guards so I could make my move like a ghost.

My heart pounded in my chest as I hurried toward her apartment building, knowing I had thirty seconds while they made their rotation.

Everything seemed so fucking sharp and clear right now, not just because I fed the beast within, but also because I was going to see my girl. Instead of the slow seduction I originally planned before I had my first taste of her cunt, I decided I was staking my claim tonight.

On her. *In* her.

She was a fucking spotlight in my evil, violent world. The lighthouse to my warship coming to shore.

The lock on the side door was laughably easy to pick with the tool I kept on my keychain. With the *click* of the lock disengaging, I slipped inside just as I heard the Russians moving toward my location, making their rotation back around to this side of her building.

Silently, I moved through the corridor, up the stairs, and steered clear of the cameras I saw. But I was so juiced up from anticipation that I sensed I was being sloppy. I should have canvased her apartment enough to know all the entrances. I should have hacked their security system and dismantled the cameras.

But right now, I couldn’t even fucking see straight through my need for Tatiana, let alone think rationally enough to have done any of those things.

Her hallway was empty, and I made my way silently down the carpeted floor until I stood in front of her door. The lock was easy to pick, and I made a mental note to fix all of this. I’d update all this shit and secure the hell out of her place to *my* specifications.

I couldn’t deny she had a highly upgraded lock system set up by her brothers from the old shit I saw on other doors, but I’d go hardcore state-of-the-art on top of that.

Once inside with the door shut and chained behind me, I stood there and just inhaled. The entire place smelled like Tatiana.

I scanned the interior. The short corridor that led to the rest of the rooms was minimally decorated. There was a small table to my left, a bowl on top

with a set of keys inside it. A gilded mirror hung above the table. A floor vase was to my right filled with artificial flowers.

There was a picture that hung on the wall, a black-and-white one of Tatiana, her brothers, Amara, and my nephew Luca—my sister and Nikolai's son.

My feet were silent as I made my way to her room, which was easy enough to find despite this being the first time I'd been to—*broken into*—her place.

Her door was slightly open, the moonlight streaming through the window casting a soft glow on her sleeping form. Jesus, she looked so gorgeous and peaceful.

I felt this sharp, stabbing pain in the center of my chest. The same one I felt when she told me I was making her feel good, after I'd only kissed her.

She was a tiny thing in the center of her bed. I stepped inside and stood by the edge of her mattress. Her dark hair was spread out on the light-colored pillowcase. I leaned in, placing a hand gently next to her pillow, and closed my eyes as I inhaled deeply.

Jesus Christ. Her scent drove me fucking insane.

She was the type of thing in life that could bring a man to his knees, to happily worship the ground she walked on.

The small rise and fall of her chest was hypnotic, and if I were the type of male who could've felt it, she would've brought me peace.

I reached out before I could stop myself and pushed a lock of dark hair away from her cheek, letting the digit linger on her soft skin.

Tatiana slept soundly, her breathing not changing.

I was too ugly for a woman like her, not just on the outside but deep inside me. I was scarred in more ways than one.

My flawless girl with an underworld family who would destroy the earth for her.

I could break Tatiana, and there'd be nothing left. If I wasn't careful. If I didn't watch myself and teach my beast to be gentle.

I kept touching her, the softness of her cheeks and throat, the way her pulse beat steadily beneath her ear. My cock was still so hard, the length throbbing, my balls heavy and full.

Fuck, I was a bastard for the things that consumed my thoughts. And the disgusting, vile images that repeatedly slammed into my mind had me acting on instinct.

I gripped the edge of her comforter and slowly pulled it down, letting my gaze travel over the thin, white shirt she wore. Braless, her tits were perfectly round shadows topped with hard nipples, which had pebbled the moment I uncovered her. I craved to fill my palm with her softness.

To say I was being a motherfucker right now for what I did was an understatement. Yet, I kept fucking doing it, as I pulled the bedding lower until her entire form was in view and goose bumps formed along her long legs.

Images of slipping my hands between her thighs and wrenching them open had me taking a step back and undressing. I was like an animal right now, letting my beast come forth so the fucker could taste Tatiana.

The flavor of her sweet pussy was seared into my memory, but I wanted more.

And when I was done with my appetizer, I'd align my huge cock at her little pussy hole and push inside, making her bleed, making her stretch to take every single inch of me. She'd cry a little, tell me it hurt, but she wouldn't want me to stop.

Christ, I could be a fucking savage with my girl, and it still wouldn't be enough. It never would.

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18

TATIANA

The dream was vivid.

It felt so good.

God, I could have an orgasm from this.

I didn't want to wake up, not when I felt firm hands pushing my thighs wide apart.

Not when the sensation of warm breath, followed by a wet tongue sliding against my pussy, felt this incredible.

I thought I moaned, or maybe it was his gruff voice vibrating against the most sensitive part of me, a part of my body only Gio had ever seen.

And as I thought about the man in question, he lifted his head from between my legs and grinned. But in my dream, he looked like the fighting machine he'd been in the underground cage match. Instead of a mask, his face was painted like a vicious skull, all sharp lines of black and white that made him seem even more frightening than normal.

Stay asleep, my voice whispered inside my mind. *Don't wake up and have this fantasy vanish.*

Gio went back to touching me, stroking his big hands that were rough and scarred along my body. He forced my thighs open even wider so he could wedge his broad shoulders between them and go back to devouring my pussy.

"So sweet," his voice growled in my head.

He moved his palms along the underside of my thighs and cupped my ass, lifting my lower half so my pussy was fully in his face.

My breasts were sensitive, my nipples tingling. It felt so good. I'd never had a dream feel so real.

I arched my back as he feasted on my pussy in the best of ways.

His growl of pleasure against my delicate flesh drew me closer to the edge.

"I want your orgasm to cover my face. I want your nectar dripping off my lips so I can lick it off and swallow every drop."

My pleasure grew to a fever pitch. I reached out and gripped his hair, the short, black strands so soft between my fingers, softer than I ever imagined they would be.

He lapped at me, sucked on my clit, and pushed a thick finger deep into my body. My inner muscles clenched around the digit, drawing him farther in.

"Sweet girl," he growled. "Non ne ho mai abbastanza. Sei la mia dipendenza, Tatiana, e non voglio mai affrontare l'astinenzfa." *I can't get enough. You're my addiction, Tatiana, and I never want to go through withdrawals.*

And then he finger-fucked me and sucked on my clit at the same time. I came with his words echoing in my head, even though I knew not what they meant. But just the lyrical sound of his Italian in that deep voice had me drowning in pleasure.

It was then I opened my eyes, reality sneaking back into my consciousness.

I saw a massive body between my legs. Tan skin. Hard muscles. So many tattoos.

He lifted his gaze and stared at me as he continued to lap at my slit. Eyes that I knew were blue looked inky-black in the nighttime shadows.

I hadn't been dreaming.

Gio was in my room. He was eating me out and growling like a primal animal.

"You taste so fucking good. *Christ*… so good," he said against me, making me shudder.

The more awake I became, the more surreal this entire experience seemed.

Clearly, he'd gotten around the guards and broke into my apartment.

To suck on my pussy while I was asleep.

Gio dug his fingers into my inner thighs, causing pain to mix with my fading orgasmic pleasure. I gasped. His head lifted, his grin positively devilish as his straight, white teeth flashed in the darkness.

While keeping his gaze locked on mine, he bit my thigh, then soothed the sting with his tongue. He did this harder with each bite, moving closer to my pussy until he was dragging his teeth along my lower lips.

My skin burned, and I knew there'd be bruising come morning. When he bit me especially hard, I arched my back, trying to push him away because the sensations were just too much.

"You know what I'm anticipating?"

I couldn't breathe nor think, let alone speak.

"I can't wait to shove my dick deep into this virgin, unused pussy, Tatiana." He dragged his tongue along the small indentation of my belly button. "I can't wait to feel your tightness around my dick, knowing I broke through that forbidden little cherry of yours."

I gripped the sheets as he lowered his head again to drag his tongue from my pussy hole to my clit before sucking the little bead into his mouth and humming around it. I cried out as he sucked me hard before letting go with a loud kissing sound that made me quiver.

"My cock is so damn hard. *Christ*, sweet girl. I've never been harder in my fucking life." He shoved his tongue deep into my body, and my inner muscles clenched around it, trying to draw him in deeper.

I knew—my body knew—what it needed. And that was Gio's thick cock forcing its way through as he pushed into me.

I moaned and closed my eyes when he ran pressured circles on my clit with his tongue.

"Смотри на меня. Смотри, как я лижу и сосу тебя." *Look at me. Watch me as I lick and suck on you.*

It drove me crazy when he spoke Russian to me. His pronunciation was heavily accented, likely by the region his teacher came from—whoever it had been who taught him my native language. But it was so hot that it turned me on just as much as when he whispered to me in Italian.

On instinct, I opened my eyes and looked at him, following every word he'd said. I recognized the same hard, dominant tone he'd used in his apartment and felt a need—and want—to obey. Something I'd never felt

before, seeing as my usual response was to fight against those who wanted to control my life.

Gio was an inch over my pussy now, his big, scarred, and tattooed hands sliding over my paler flesh. His touch was soft, but I knew the strength he wielded.

“I want you to come all over my face again. I want you to make my lips numb because you ground this perfect, pink little cunt all over my mouth.”

He went back to eating me out. And the entire time, Gio stared into my eyes, making sure I didn't disobey.

I felt him push one, then two fingers into my body, and pain exploded in my bottom lip. I realized I was biting it hard enough I broke the flesh, tasting the metallic flavor of blood as I licked it, coating my tongue.

Faster than I could anticipate, Gio made me come so hard and long I called out his name. Head pressing back, mouth parted, and eyes closed, I rode out the pleasure against Gio’s face until I felt his hard body press down on me from above.

“Look at me.” His voice was hard and stern, and he gripped my chin and forced me to stare into his eyes.

Gio dragged his tongue over my bottom lip, licking up the blood that welled there.

“I’m going to do the same to your virgin pussy when I pop that cherry, pretty baby.”

My body felt like it seized in anticipation at the promise.

Gio licked my lips once more, then pulled back and groaned, “God, you’re so fucking beautiful. There’s not one thing about you that doesn’t drive me fucking insane.” And when he kissed me, I felt all his dark need for me projected into that kiss. “My beautiful girl. You want to be my pretty slut?”

I gasped at his praise and the obscenely erotic degradation that followed.

“But only mine, Tatiana. You’ll only ever be *my* good little slut.” He still gripped my chin as he made that declaration. “I can’t wait to see you on your knees, these gorgeous eyes staring up at me as you try to take all my cock down your throat. You’ll gag, and spit will spill out the corners of these pink lips because I'm too big for this perfect mouth of yours.”

I was panting as he talked dirty to me.

“But you won’t stop. I won’t let you. I’ll come down your throat and make you drink it all. Hell, my balls are so full that I’ll have more for you. I’ll come all over your face. I’ll paint your tits with ropes of jizz. Fuck, *cara*.” *Sweetheart*. “My girl.”

Gio leaned far enough away from me so he could get me fully undressed. And I let him. I’d let him do whatever he wanted to me. “La mia piccola bambola Russa.”

I knew what that meant, since I looked it up the moment I was alone after the first time he said it. I could easily remember it phonetically, since the way in which he spoke it had made me shiver, even as it was branded on my mind—so possessive, like he felt whatever those Italian words were oh-so deeply.

My little Russian doll.

He dragged his tongue over my lips once more before he positioned himself back between my legs. He looked so huge compared to me. So big and strong. He was all hard lines and bulging muscles against my feminine curves and softness. I let my gaze travel over his chest, tracing the dark lines of his tattoos with my eyes. He had so many that barely any olive-toned skin showed throughout the artwork.

I finally focused on his cock. The heavy length stood straight out in front of him, so intimidating with his weighted sack hanging beneath his enormous erection. His crown was slick and glossy with pre-cum, and when he grabbed the base, squeezing himself from root to head, I watched as more clear fluid formed at the tip.

Gio then—shockingly—shoved two fingers into me until I cried out and bowed my back. He pumped those digits in and out of me for only a few seconds before pulling them out and holding them up, showing me how disgustingly wet I was. He lifted an eyebrow at me, apparently seeing the distaste in my expression.

“So primed for me, *cara*. And do you not believe me when I tell you how delicious your cunt is?” He smiled wickedly. “I can make you.” Gio leaned in, and he reached toward me with his other hand. I could see he was about to grab my throat, but he suddenly stopped, the smile falling from his handsome face as he curled his fingers into his palm.

I knew right then he was afraid to touch me there because of what happened, what he saved me from. And the fact that he fought his own urges in order to not trigger me, made me feel things that were way

different than merely lust, and needs that were unidentifiable thanks to my inexperience. I reached out and wrapped both my hands around his thick, tattooed wrist and slowly brought his clenched fist to my neck. Before he touched me, we stared into each other's eyes, both of us panting.

"I trust you," I whispered. "I want to move past this. I want to be with you in every way, Gio."

He closed his eyes, and I swore his entire body shivered. When he relaxed his hand, I pressed his open palm to my throat, and his fingers gently but firmly encircled it.

I gasped but not from fear. I wasn't thinking about anything but how good and right it felt being with Gio. I didn't fight him, didn't push him away.

Because I didn't want to.

I didn't know what it was, but this act… turned me on even more, despite the shit that had gone down last week.

"More, Gio," I whispered, and he froze for a second, but then he gave me what I wanted. He tightened his grip, and I felt myself get lightheaded.

He loosened his hold a bit and leaned in to kiss me, slow and deep, as if forcing himself to be gentle with me.

When Gio pulled his head back, he grinned darkly like he had before, like the dangerous predator he was, and then shoved those two fingers that had been in my pussy between my lips. He still had his other hand around my throat but not tight enough I couldn't breathe.

And for long seconds, he finger-fucked my mouth, making sure I sucked off every drop of my pussy juices from his fingers.

"Now… tell Daddy he was right," he ordered, and I clenched just as I did the first time he used that title in his apartment.

Plus, I had to admit… it didn't taste bad at all. In fact, my wetness didn't taste like much of anything; it was the saltiness of his fingers and the lingering flavor of my bloody lip I noticed more.

"You were right, Daddy." My face flamed as I said the name.

"*Fuck*. The things I want to do to you," he groaned. "The things I *will* do to you."

He got back into position and aimed his cockhead at my pussy. The sight of him jerking off once more, from root to tip, dragged an erotic moan from me. His pre-cum dripped from the crown to land right on my slit, and I sucked in a breath at the intense sensation that small act caused within me.

“Rub it in,” he demanded.

I reached down and smoothed my index finger over it, rubbing his cum into me.

“I want to fill you up, Tatiana. I want to make you so full it drips out of you all day. You’ll have to keep changing your panties because they’ll be soaked from all the seed I pumped into your pussy.”

Gio leaned down and dragged the tip of his nose along my neck, inhaling deeply. “I love that I’ve marked you. That you smell like me.” His touch was soft as he slid a hand between my thighs.

I moaned, but that sound turned into a shocked cry when he slapped my pussy.

“*Cara*,” he groaned. “I’m gonna make sure you hurt deep inside in the best way when I’m done with you.” His voice was so feral. “I want to hear you say it, baby girl. I want to hear you tell me what you want. That you like being my beautiful whore.”

This is so hot.

“I want you to give it all to me. I want that enormous cock pushing into me.” God, I’d never said such crude things before. “I want it to hurt, Gio.”

He groaned and bared his teeth like my words called to the animal inside him.

“I want…” I exhaled and inhaled sharply. His focus on me was so severe. “I want to only be *your* slut. I want you to use me. To touch and kiss me. To—” *love me*. I kept that last part to myself. It was too soon. It was too much. “I want you to make me yours.” It was as close to saying those three elusive words as I was gonna get right now. If ever.

“Nobody will ever feel as good as you do, Tatiana.”

Nothing else was said as he notched his cockhead at my entrance. There was no more preamble. No waiting or anticipation. Gio pushed into me with such need and desire that he tore through my innocence and took it as his own.

The pain was instant. Constant. As he gave me inch after inch.

This wasn’t how I ever envisioned my first time going. I’d seen myself fighting, refusing. I saw myself married off to a bastard of my father’s choosing, so the only thing I could ever picture for losing my virginity had been brutality.

But here I was, willing. I was ready. And I wanted Gio with an obsession that made me question my reality and sanity.

“You get slow and gentle tonight, *cara*, but once you’re healed, I’m going to fuck you like the savage I am.”

A part of me wanted to tell Gio I didn’t want or need slow and gentle. I was stronger than I looked. *I want his brutality.*

“You like when I’m sweet with you, Tatiana?” He was buried to the hilt inside me, not moving for a moment, letting his words fully sink in as deep as his body. “You like knowing a killer took your virginity?” He pulled out and slid back in. His hands were on either side of my head, caging me in and forcing me to take whatever he gave.

I couldn’t speak, just nodded and bit my lip.

“You like knowing I’d kill a man for even looking at you the wrong way?”

I closed my eyes and moaned, my pussy clamping down around him and pulling a gruff sound from deep within his chest.

He pulled out and then sank in deep again, repeating this process over and over.

“Open those beautiful eyes and let me see the pain and pleasure in them, my little Russian doll.”

I did as he asked, gasping at his expression and how fierce it was.

His passion was like this aggressive, violent monster within him. And it was fully displayed and bared for me to see.

I lifted my hips, rising so he’d hit deeper, pushing inside of my body fully. Gio looked down and watched me do this repeatedly, his abdominal muscles contracting as his hips swung and plowed into me. The pain was constant, but the more he stretched me, the more that burn and discomfort faded to the background, and something twisted and delicious took its place.

“All I can think about is filling you up,” he whispered so low I almost didn't hear him.

I gripped his biceps, digging into his flesh until I knew my nails scoring him had to hurt.

“Tutto ciò a cui riesco a pensare è venire profondamente dentro di te. Non posso smettere di pensare a riempire il tuo grembo finché non ti avrò marchiata per sempre. Finché non sarà innegabile che sei mia perché ho lasciato una parte di me in te.” *All I can think about is coming deep inside of you. I can't stop thinking about filling up your womb until I've marked*

you forever. Until it's undeniable that you're mine because I've left a part of myself in you.

I didn’t know what he said, but I knew it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard. It was because Gio spoke it with such reverence. I knew he meant whatever he’d just uttered under his breath.

I realized I kept fucking myself on him, and he growled, the sound making me juicier.

“You filthy, fucking beautiful girl.” He lowered his gaze back down between my thighs, his nostrils flaring, the rumble coming from him growing louder by the second.

Gio slid his hands around so he could grip my ass and angle my hips to dive even deeper as he drove in and out of me. His powerful motions rocked the bed, causing the headboard to slam against the wall.

“I want you to know,” he snarled, “that everything changed between us the night I killed that motherfucker.”

I didn't know what exactly he meant, but I knew what I wanted it to mean. His expression was savage as he thrusted in and out of me, rotating his hips and driving deeper until the sensation consumed me and there was nothing but two things left in the entire universe.

Me and Gio.

“Say it,” he said between clenched teeth. “Tell me you’re mine and that you want me to kill anyone who thinks otherwise.”

I was nodding before he finished speaking. I’d never wanted anything more than that in my entire life.

“I’m yours,” I said, the only words that formed, the only ones that would ever matter in the grand scheme of things. It didn’t matter what happened. I would always and forever be Gio Bianchi’s.

“My good girl.” He plowed inside hard and fast, and I felt another orgasm rising within me with such force it stole my vision.

A realization hit me, and I gasped, the pleasure never ending. “Gio,” I moaned his name. “Wait… I’m not on birth control.” I didn’t know why that mattered right now, or why my brain decided to force my lips to spew the words out. It wasn’t even like Gio had taken any precautions himself, not when his cock was bare inside me as he kept pounding away.

Something dark and primal, a gruff sound that was wholly male, came out from deep within his chest. He snarled, baring his teeth as he pinned me down and fucked me harder.

Gio leaned in close and said through a locked jaw, “Good, *bella*. I want you to be full of my cum. I want it to stick.”

I felt my eyes widen at his words. Oh God, they were going to make me….

The pleasure lit my body up from the inside out until all I could do was clutch on to Gio like he was the only lifeline I needed in the world.

That scared the hell out of me.

And made me crave it all.

“Gesù Cristo.” *Jesus Christ*. Gio then roared as he came, and all I could do was stare up at him like the god of the underworld he was.

His hand was back around my throat, the force pushing me into the pillow. I could *feel* his orgasm, felt the thick, hot ropes of his cum cover every inch of me on the inside.

“Gio,” I gasped his name, unable to breathe. He seemed crazed as he found his pleasure but was conscious enough of my safety to loosen his hold so I could suck in oxygen.

With one more full-body tremor through his powerful form, Gio let his head hang as he breathed roughly. He was covered in a light sheen of sweat, the moonlight casting shadows across the masculine lines and sharp edges of his muscles.

He leaned in so I felt his lips brush against my ear, and whispered, “Spero di averti messa incinta stanotte.”

I didn’t know what he said until he repeated the words in Russian.

I hope I got you pregnant tonight.

My body was sated and weak, and my arms were too heavy to hold up as I let them fall back to the mattress on either side of me.

We lay there for several moments just trying to catch our breath, my inner muscles rhythmically clenching around his softening cock. But the longer he stayed buried in me, the more I felt that length stiffen.

“La mia bella ragazza.” *My beautiful girl*.

When Gio finally pulled out and leaned back so he knelt between my splayed thighs, I couldn’t help but stare at his dick. The slash of moonlight made that very male part of him visible with startling clarity.

His cock glistened with a mixture of my pussy wetness and his cum, but it was the streaks of my virgin blood along the length and at the base of his erection that had a shot of adrenaline rushing through me.

“Continua a guardarlo, bella. Lo renderà solo più duroI.” As if to drive what he just said home, he translated it to English as he gripped his shaft, dragging his palm down to the base of his cock and then back up the length. “Keep looking at it, beautiful. It’ll only make it harder.”

When he got to the head, I bit my lip as I watched a residual bead of cum push out of the slit. He moved up the bed on his knees, now framing me on either side of my shoulders, his cockhead pointed right at my mouth.

“Open up. Lick it clean.”

I was a fiend, it seemed, as I didn’t hesitate to drag my tongue over the tip, even though it was the first time a dick had ever been near my mouth before. I licked away the salty remnants of his orgasm, and then I turned my head and ran my tongue along his length, tasting myself and the coppery tang of my blood.

Gio shifted back before I could properly suck him into my mouth, and then he smoothed his fingers along my overly sensitive pussy. I gasped at how sore I was when he gently pushed the digits into me.

“All of my cum belongs inside of you. *Deep* inside, bella.” When he pulled his fingers back out, it was to immediately shove them into my mouth. “I want to be deep in your womb,” he said, and I licked his middle and index fingers clean. “And all the way down into your belly, Tatiana.”

I moaned and sucked on him like I couldn’t get enough. Which I couldn’t.

And just as he’d promised when he licked my bloody lip, Gio leaned down and started licking my pussy, cleaning me with his tongue in a clear act of ownership.

And then he was lying beside me, pulling the blankets over us and holding me so close to him I felt nothing but the security, comfort, and safety that only Gio could give me.

I was in trouble. I knew that as he buried his nose in my hair and exhaled like he’d never felt such… comfort himself. I didn't want to believe it was wishful thinking on my part. I didn’t want to imagine all of this, only to have the world turn upside down because it wasn’t the same for him.

I was playing Russian roulette with the leader of the West Coast Cosa Nostra. But not even danger could sway rationalization or my need for self-preservation.

He curled his body around mine and kept his arm banded around my middle as if he was afraid I’d leave.

Didn’t he know I’d rather die?

“Stay with me tonight,” I whispered, not sure if I even said it out loud. After a moment of comfortable silence, Gio kissed the crown of my head.

“Resterò con te per sempre, cara mia.”

I repeated the words over and over in my head so I could look them up tomorrow.

I’ll stay with you forever, my beloved.

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GIO

I lay beside Tatiana, the warmth of her body pressed against mine, making me feel alive. The feeling of her soft breaths moving along my chest had my heart feeling a little lighter.

My heart pounded not from what we'd just shared but from how Tatiana made me feel.

She stirred, stretching her lean, perfectly smooth, and warm body against mine. I ran my hand up and down her back, and she tipped her head to look into my eyes.

Her expression held a mix of curiosity and concern, and I felt myself tense at the weight of the conversation I knew was coming.

"Gio," she began, her voice a gentle whisper.

I kept running my hand up and down her back, giving her the time she needed to ask what she wanted. I knew this moment was bound to happen, and I would've been lying if I didn't admit it gave me a mix of anxiety. Because I'd never spoken of my childhood shit with anyone. And what scared me the most was that I *wanted* to share that part of myself with Tatiana.

"Why do you fight in the underground cage matches?"

I stared at the ceiling and contemplated how I'd answer.

"Why do you go by D'yavol?"

I used my other hand to smooth my palm over my face. After taking a deep breath, I allowed the memories I usually kept buried to claw their way to the surface. Tatiana deserved to know. She needed to understand the darkness that lived within me because I wasn't letting her walk away.

"It's not something I've talked about before," I started, still staring at the ceiling, my voice void of emotion. "Not with anyone—"

"I don't want you to share what you're not comfortable—"

"But you... you deserve to know the truth."

Her hand found mine, pulled it closer, intertwined our fingers, and rested them on my chest, and I stayed silent for long moments.

"My father," I began, the words tasting bitter and vile on my tongue, "he trained me at a young age to handle pain and violence." She squeezed my hand. "He was a monster. A cruel, sadistic bastard who took pleasure in beating me because he thought it was the only way to make sure I didn't grow up to be weak."

"I'm sorry."

I gritted my teeth at her words. They pissed me off, not because she said them but because having anyone pity me was like a hot poker in my chest.

"He left scars, both on my body and in my mind." I lifted my arm, and our hands broke apart as I stared at my tattoos. "The ink… they're there to hide the marks he left behind. To cover the reminders of the pain and violence."

Tatiana stayed silent, letting me spit this vile shit out.

"I fight because I need an outlet for the darkness inside me, the monster that has a hold on me. For the rest of my fucking life, that motherfucker will live inside me." Memories of my father beating me with his hands, belt… hell, anything he could use… played through my mind. "When I step into that cage, when I become D'yavol, I can unleash all the anger, all the rage that festers within me." She rose so she could fully look at my face, and I stared into her beautiful blue eyes. "It's a way to keep my monster at bay. To stop it from consuming me entirely."

She traced her fingers over the lines of one of my tattoos on my chest, her touch soothing and grounding me.

"But you—" I felt this uncomfortable and unusual tightening in my chest. "—Tatiana, you've brought something different into my life. Something I never thought I'd experience. Something I never thought a bastard like me would get to feel." My expression softened as I cupped her

face and smoothed my thumb along her cheek. “You've brought light. And for the first time in my godforsaken life, I’ve found something that penetrates the darkness.” I felt my entire body shake from the force of that realization. “You keep the monster at bay.”

“Gio—” Her voice broke.

My gaze stayed locked with hers. “And because of that, Tatiana, I won't ever let you go. You're mine, *cara*. Every part of you. I won't ever let anyone take you away from me.” I pulled her back into me, keeping her close as I let the thoughts I’d never uttered to another person spill out of my mouth. “You belong to me, and I to you. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

God, I had never spoken truer words.

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NIKOLAI

“Tatiana good?” Dmitry asked as he leaned against the wall and stared at the ground, his jaw working as he ground his teeth.

“After dinner, the men checked in that she cleaned the kitchen and was turning in for the night. She also told them to ‘fuck off’ when they wanted to stay outside the front door and that ‘guard dogs stayed outside the apartment building.’”

I would have chuckled at the piss and vinegar in my baby sister, but I was too jacked up on anger and adrenaline to find any humor that she let the Petrov temper take control.

“Her bedroom light went out, and she’s been quiet ever since.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face, feeling the weight of fucking *everything* on my shoulders. I knew Dmitry felt the same.

The backroom in the basement of one of the empty buildings we owned was dimly lit, and the air was heavy with violent tension. There were three other men we’d brought along for this “meeting” and each one of us was jonesing to let out some aggression.

I paced back and forth as anticipation coursed through my veins like a drug. The only fucking drug I needed to get the job done. And by job, I meant slaughtering my enemies.

The promise of violence, of retribution and vengeance, was so intoxicating it coated the air like thick smog.

“When the fuck are they showing—” Dmitry’s words were cut off when the heavy, metal door creaked open. We all turned and focused on the young man who was being dragged in by two of our soldiers.

The man couldn’t have been more than twenty-five, and despite his muscular frame, the fucker was pale and trembling, his fear seeping out of him like an infection from a wound.

Our men hauled him into the center of the room and tossed him on the ground, and the guy flipped onto his ass before standing. His leg was fucked up, which was clear because he couldn’t keep much weight on it as he hobbled around, looking at the big motherfucking Russians who surrounded him.

“What's your name?” Dmitry commanded, his voice cold and authoritative. He pushed off the wall, making his way a few steps toward the scared shitless little douchebag. When silence met Dmitry’s question, he barked out, “Speak, motherfucker.”

“J-Josh,” the other man stuttered. The vicious pause that followed his response had him swallowing hard, his eyes darting between us.

I could see the fear in his gaze, and I would’ve been lying if I didn’t admit it got me off. “You know why you're here.” It wasn’t a question. His bloody nose and black eye told me our message had been heard and felt.

“I-I was at the warehouse. I saw everything,” he stammered.

We put out feelers after we discovered someone had taken out Maksim. Although Maksim wasn’t a top-level member, he was still part of the Bratva, so it was a direct insult and hit to me and my brother. We didn’t fuck around when it came to anyone thinking they could make a move on us.

I stared hard at Josh, and it was clear the intensity of my glare scared the shit out of him. He flinched and took a step back, and then another one, until he slammed into Dmitry’s chest. My brother placed his big hands on Josh’s shoulders and dug his fingers in hard enough the guy squealed like a pig.

Dmitry pushed him forward, and Josh stumbled, righting himself as he kept his focus on me.

“Why didn’t you come to us with this information?” I asked.

Josh didn’t answer, just looked at all the men surrounding him.

“Why did you run when you heard we were looking for you?” Dmitry added, walking over, and he got on his haunches, rifling through the black

tool bag we brought for tonight. When he stood and faced our “guest,” holding up a hunting knife, Josh started crying.

“Oh, fuck,” he blubbered. “Please.” He held his hands up, palms facing outward in defense. “I got scared.” He ran the back of his hand over his nose, smearing snot and blood across his cheek. “I planned on coming to you and telling you everything, but I was scared shitless. Fuck, can you blame me?”

I looked at Dmitry, and after a prolonged pause, we both started laughing. “True that,” I said, but then sobered instantly when I focused back on Josh. “Running was the wrong move, man. Made you look guilty. Like maybe you were part of it.”

Josh shook his head furiously, squeezed his eyes shut, and sniffed, causing blood to slip out of his nose. “No, *no-no-no*. I would never go against you guys. I’d never go against the Petrovs.” He was stumbling over his words, his fear making him seem sloppy.

“Calm the fuck down before you piss yourself.” The disgust in Dmitry’s voice was tangible. “Just tell us what you saw, and we'll talk about you leaving here, Josh. Sound good?”

He just wouldn’t be leaving in one piece. Many pieces. But not in a way that he was still breathing and walking out on his own.

When Josh didn’t speak right away, I was in front of him a second later, my fingers digging into his cheeks and chin. “We know you were there, trying to score drugs—which we can ignore that you were in our territory but buying from a scumbag who we’ve made perfectly clear is not allowed to sell here. We just want to know what happened in the warehouse.” I kept my voice level, easy. No need to scare the prey before it gave us predators what we wanted. He’d *see* how dangerous we were soon enough.

“There were four men,” Josh began, his voice shaking. “Three of them were speaking Russian and looking through crates. They started pulling the shipment out.”

We gave him a few seconds to get his bearings before telling the piss-stain to hurry the fuck up.

“I heard the gunshots first and saw two of them drop like freakin’ flies. Then a man came out of the shadows. He was dressed all in black with a hood covering his head. I couldn’t see his face clearly.”

“And then?” Dmitry snapped, his patience thin.

“H-He shot the last guy point-blank right in the head.”

“Did he see you?” I asked, my voice void of emotion, although inside I was a volcano about to erupt.

Josh shook his head. “I stayed hidden. But I knew I was going to tell you right away.”

“But you didn’t,” Dmitry said and cleaned beneath his fingernail with the tip of the hunting knife he still held.

Josh’s eyes were wide as hell as he stared at my brother. “When he left, I panicked and tried to move out of the shadows. My foot caught a box, and he turned around. The overhead light showed me his face.” He swallowed and looked between us.

The fucker knew who he saw.

“I’d seen him before… at one of the underground fights.”

I ground my teeth, and Dmitry made a feral sound from deep within his chest. Dmitry handled the fights. Hell, he just got out of prison not that long ago for shit that went down at one of the fights. Five fucking years, my brother was locked away. So the fact that one fighter was going behind our backs and killing off our men meant we had a traitor close to us.

“Who was it?” Dmitry asked between clenched teeth.

Josh shook his head again. “I-I was high when I saw him fight. I don’t remember what they called him, but I remembered his face… and all those tattoos, and his dark hair and blue eyes.”

We knew… we fucking knew exactly who he was talking about.

The only motherfucker decked out in tattoos with jet black hair and ice blue eyes was the leader of the West Coast Cosa Nostra.

Fucking Gio.

Before we could pry more information out of the asshole, he started stammering again.

“But… but I remember something from the warehouse.” Josh looked hopeful, like what he was about to tell us was going to save his fucking life. It wouldn’t.

“The last man to die mentioned something about The Stygian Syndicate. I couldn’t hear anything else from him. But the man who killed him spoke Italian in response.”

I narrowed my eyes at Josh. “Are you sure about that? You learn some Rosetta Stone shit or something?”

Josh licked his lips and winced as his tongue came into contact with the split skin. “When I was younger, I had a neighbor who was Italian. I

recognized the language enough to tell the killer spoke Italian."

It clicked like the perfect fucking puzzle piece sliding into place. And as I stared at my brother, Dmitry's eyes narrowed, he curled his lip, and he lowered his head as he stared at the ground.

There was only one fighter who spoke Italian.

One fighter who had dark hair and blue eyes and was covered in tattoos.

One fighter who went by a Russian name, D'yavol, so no one would suspect he wasn't one of us.

My motherfucking brother-in-law.

Gio.

My fists were clenched, my nails digging into my palms. "You sure about all that, Josh?"

He nodded quickly. "Yes. God, yes, that's the truth. I swear it," his voice was barely above a whisper.

My mind raced with dark thoughts.

"That motherfucker," Dmitry snapped under his breath.

Gio. That bastard. The audacity to step into our territory to kill Maksim and our men. My lip curled into a snarl.

I focused my attention on Josh, looked at Dmitry, and my brother nodded once. He strode up to him, curled his hand around the other man's nape, and Josh whimpered. He looked into Dmitry's eyes and saw his fate.

"You've been a big help, Josh." His voice was low. "For that, we thank you." And then he plunged the hunting knife into Josh's navel and dragged the blade up.

His screams were high-pitched before turning wet as his lungs filled with blood. His insides spilled out and landed with a *splat* on the concrete. Dmitry took a step back, his pants and clothes covered in the red, viscous fluid.

Josh fell to the ground, a corpse at my brother's feet. Dmitry turned to face me, holding up the knife and showing how his hand was covered in blood. He chuckled and cleaned the blade off on his pant leg.

"Clean this up and get rid of the body," I addressed our men and gestured for Dmitry to follow me out. We headed down the dilapidated corridor until we found ourselves in an old office.

"That bastard thinks he can come into our territory and take out one of our own?" Dmitry spoke instantly, his voice a vicious whisper. "Maksim

was at the bottom of the fucking barrel, but he was one of ours, and Gio just—”

“Just calm down,” I interrupted, my voice icy and controlled. It sure as hell was a stark contrast to the inferno burning within me.

I could hear Dmitry breathing hard, and after a second, he grunted and started pacing.

“This is the second time we’ve heard about The Stygian Syndicate.” My mind raced as I thought about all of this. “Aside from Gio and the Cosa Nostra being involved in taking out our men—”

“Gio might have gone rogue. We have to be level-headed right now. The Cosa Nostra may not even know he’s gone off the fucking deep end.”

I cocked an eyebrow at my brother. “Dude, we are the furthest thing from being level-headed.”

Dmitry turned and started pacing again.

My fury only intensified. “It makes sense.”

Dmitry looked at me like I'd lost my damn mind.

“Gio has always been ambitious. Look how he stepped up after his father was taken out. He runs his crew like a fucking drill sergeant. None of those men would go against him.”

“You think Gio is involved with The Stygian Syndicate?”

I shrugged and ran a hand over my hair, not sure how to answer Dmitry. “I don’t fucking know, but Maksim clearly knew shit about them, which he never told us about.”

“But we can’t rule out that Gio may be involved with them or, at the very least, knows about this fucking group. Being allies means he should have told us because, if it affected him, it could affect us.”

Every scenario of Gio being involved with this rogue group that was stirring shit up played through my head. I knew it probably was for Dmitry too.

“Shit, man. This is a problem. More than just a traitor we can take out to send a message to others. This is coming from inside our goddamn house.”

“Yeah,” I exhaled and scrubbed a hand over my jaw.

Fuck, did Gio know about Tatiana’s attack? Clearly, this Stygian piece-of-shit group was involved with that, given our intel. And if Gio knew about them, he’d for sure know about her assault.

The realization was like gasoline on the fire inside me. I thought about Tatiana’s attack.

My sister. Our blood.

I looked at Dmitry and saw he was already staring at me. He was thinking the same thing I was.

“We have a lot of shit to talk about.”

He nodded after I spoke, his jaw set with determination. “Gather our men. We’re going to get every single fucking detail and find out how deep Gio is involved with The Stygian. After that, we’ll deal with him taking out our men.”

As we left the backroom, I felt a thrill of anticipation move through me. The promise of violence and retribution was intoxicating, but hanging on to that same thought was the fact that Gio might have betrayed us.

I focused on that dark beast within me, the monster who I let sink its claws deep within me.

I stayed in my element where I could focus on what I knew—and felt—best.

Darkness. Violence. Payback.

This war had just started, and fucking hell was I ready to bathe in blood and chaos.

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GIO

Several weeks had passed since Tatiana and I started… whatever it was we were doing. And with each passing day, with each moment we spent together, I felt myself falling deeper and fucking harder for my pretty, little Russian princess.

She was an angel, and I was the devil keeping her for myself.

I was Hades and refused to let my Persephone go.

Because she was mine, and I'd never had anything that was truly… mine.

When we spent time together, it was all physical. My mind was filled with thoughts of all my needs and wants. I could barely think straight when she was around, this primal part of me demanding I mark her from the inside out.

Breed her.

We didn't talk about personal matters. It wasn't because I didn't want to but because, when she was near, I couldn't fucking keep my brain focused on anything but her. My duties and responsibilities faded. All that mattered was… Tatiana.

She'd gotten good at sneaking around, and I was a fucking master at breaking and entering her apartment with no one knowing.

And every time I slipped into her apartment, I'd wake her up with my face between her thighs and my tongue licking at her perfect slit.

The truth was… I couldn't stay away from her, and that was clear by the fact that I hadn’t left Desolation and gone back home to the West Coast since I came here to kill Maksim the same day she showed up at my building.

Shit, I should be focused on making sure my involvement with the Bratva lackey was never revealed. I should have kept my ear to the ground and focused on my men doing some reconnaissance, to make sure Dmitry and Nikolai weren’t digging too deep into the shit that happened.

And I was, to an extent.

But here I was again, opening her front door—which she started leaving unlocked for me—and closing it behind me.

Her apartment was dark, the hour late, and I was already hard with the thought of eating her out to wake her up. I just could never get enough. I couldn't get my fill of my girl.

I swept my gaze around her kitchen, then the living room, before I saw a small form kneeling a few feet from me and shrouded in the shadows. I inhaled deeply, taking in her scent. The longer I stood there and stared at her, the more my eyes adjusted, and I saw she was nude and kneeling, her tits perfect, her nipples hard.

She was on her knees in front of me, and my cock liked both the thought of what that meant *and* the image of her before me. The fucker throbbed like my pulse was located right in its base. My balls were drawn up high and tight, and I felt my boxer briefs become damp from pre-cum leaking out of the slit.

“Daddy,” she whispered, and my knees nearly buckled. There was this needy quality to her voice as she addressed me as her Dominant, but there was also something more, something that called to the primal part of me and demanded more.

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t, not when all I wanted to do was fuck her until she wouldn’t be able to walk straight tomorrow, all while my cum leaked out of her pussy.

Instead of saying a fucking word, I reached down and undid the button of my dark jeans, then slid the zipper down, freeing my massive, hard cock.

“Come closer, Tatiana,” I said low, deep, and keeping my focus on her.

She exhaled slowly and went to stand, but when I shook my head, she froze.

“Crawl to me, princess.”

A soft sound left her, and her gaze dropped to the thick length I now held in my hand. Tatiana licked her lips, and the sight of that caused pre-cum to bead at the crown. The fat droplet spilled over and slipped down the underside of my dick.

I rubbed my palm up and down, using my cum as lube to stroke myself as she did what I said.

Fuck, I was already so close to getting off.

She drives me crazy.

More pre-cum formed. More slid down the underside of my erection and onto my balls before dripping onto her foyer's polished wooden floor.

"You see what you do to me, Tatiana? Making me leak like a fucking faucet. Like I have zero control."

She moaned and crawled to me on her hands and knees, her small tits jiggling from her movements. When she was right in front of me, her head tipped back, her eyes wide and needy for what only I could give her. I forced more cum out and made a nice little puddle on the floor.

"Lick it all up, sweet girl. Let me see you lean down. I want to watch that pretty, little pink tongue lap it up before you suck my cock and gag on it."

I'd never felt my heart race this hard, never felt the rush Tatiana gave me.

I expected her to say no, to tell me to go fuck myself with my perverse desire for humiliation. But instead, she just licked her lips and leaned down, dragging her tongue along the floor and drinking up all the seed I gave her.

And when the floor was clean, she rose, staring me in the eyes, and—without me saying a word—wrapped her little hand around the base of my shaft to take over stroking me.

My anticipation grew to a dangerous level.

Her lips were so pretty, this beautiful shade of pink that was the same color as her perfect pussy.

Her hair looked so dark with the shadows hugging her. I reached out and dragged my hand through the locks before tangling my fingers in a handful, forcing her head closer to where I wanted her.

"Go on." I tightened my grip on her hair, and she gasped, her lips parting, which was exactly what I wanted. "Suck it. Take it all the way back to your throat and gag on my cock." I bent slightly, bringing our faces closer together, and growled, "Suck on my cock like you're starving, baby."

She nodded and focused on my dick for only a second before she sucked the crown between her lips for the very first time. Not just with me, but for the first time in her life. Up until now, I'd only allowed her to lick me like a lollipop the first night I tasted her.

God, her mouth felt incredible, but she pulled away after only teasing the head for a few seconds.

Tatiana glanced up at me, her eyes worried, uncertainty on her face. "I don't know how to do this," she breathed out. "I want to make you feel good, but I don't—"

"You just existing makes me feel good, *cara*."

I heard her inhale sharply, and she held that breath in before letting it out slowly.

"You make me feel better than anything or anyone else ever has." I squatted to drag my tongue over her lips before rising again. "Now, open that pretty mouth and suck my cock."

Her little body shivered as she took my dick in her hand, pulled it downward so she could reach the head from her knees once again, then sucked me into that warm, wet cavern.

For long seconds, I just let her get used to my girth and texture. I let her explore me with her tongue and mouth, and she did it as if memorizing every detail, from the slit at the very tip, the ridge of my glans, the veins along my shaft. She licked me slowly, moaning through her sighs, as if savoring my flavor.

I still had my hand in her hair and tugged her head back, opening up her throat as I started moving my cock in and out between her lips. Sweat started beading along my temples the longer she sucked my dick.

"God, sweetheart. You're such a good girl. *My* good girl." I hummed as I swung my hips back and forth, pushing in a little more every time. "Never felt anything so perfect as you." I slid another inch inside. "Now relax that throat and take the rest of me." Saliva formed in the corners of her mouth before slipping out. I wasn't giving her a reprieve. I couldn't.

I wanted this—her—too fucking badly.

And then I felt my tip hit the back of her throat. She gagged, her eyes watering so much she was crying now. She made a sloppy mess on me and her face with the excess saliva and tears, and, *Jesus Christ,* I found it hot as hell.

And Tatiana never stopped. Never tried to slow me down.

She took all of me.

I thrust my hips forward and retreated. Back and forth, faster and a little harder.

“That’s it. You’re such a good girl. You’re taking me so well.”

The fat tears that rolled down her cheeks as I thrusted in and out of her mouth spurred me on.

I had both hands in her hair now and tightened them in the locks, knowing I was going to blow my wad and shoot it right down her throat and into her belly.

My Russian beauty moaned around my girth.

“You’re making me feel so good, baby.” I felt like a beast right now, my dark monster taking control as I mouth-fucked the hell out of her. I knew she could barely breathe, and I liked that she seemed to enjoy being used by me.

But only ever by me. I’ll kill anyone who thinks they can have her.

My balls slapped against the underside of her chin, and as much as I knew Tatiana was struggling to take me like this, she never tried to stop me.

I didn’t warn her, wanting to see what reaction she’d have. Spurts of cum shot out of me, white ropes that were thick and a prequel to the massive load I had planned for her womb.

I growled at the image my thoughts conjured, of seeing my girl sprawled out, her legs spread, my cum leaking out of her because I filled her to the brim.

Christ, I was going to come again. But before I did, I pulled out, gasping for oxygen, and gripping the base of my cock to cut off my impending orgasm.

She stayed on her knees and stared up at me, her mouth red and swollen, spit and remnants of my seed covering her lips and dripping out the corners.

“Such a fucking beautiful mess, baby.” I lifted her easily into my arms and cradled her.

She deserved so much better than me. She deserved gentle and sweet every time.

Instead, I was taking her to her room to breed the fuck out of her.

Because if she wasn’t already pregnant, she would be after tonight.

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TATIANA

Gio stood above me as I lay in my bed, my body fully naked and on fire after sucking his cock in the foyer.

I felt like I was about to be offered up as a sacrifice to a dark god.

“The things I want to do to you, Tatiana.” His voice was low and deep, the shadows casting monsters around the room.

But I wasn’t afraid because the most dangerous thing in the world stood in front of me, and I knew he’d never hurt me.

“They’d scare you.” He still had yet to move. He just stood there watching me, his body still clothed in black, yet his cock stood out from his open zipper, all long and thick and dripping cum onto my bedspread.

“My desires go deep and dark, *cara*.” His voice was guttural. Dangerous. “They’re obscene.”

God, I thought. *I want that*.

I was soaked, sopping between my legs, so much that I knew I made a damp spot beneath me. I scissored my legs slightly, needing friction… relief.

He was silent as he got undressed, as he showcased all that tan skin covered in dark ink. Gio placed one knee on the mattress, then the other, his cock slightly bobbing from the motion.

I felt frozen, unable to move, let alone breathe, as he covered my body with his and instantly ground his enormous cock against my belly.

Trying to stop the mewl that left me was impossible, so I just lifted my hands and curled my fingers around his tattooed biceps, digging my nails into his warm flesh until he cursed under his breath.

He kept grinding his cock against my belly, and I felt his cum smearing along my skin as if he were marking me, using me as his canvas.

I let out another little sound, one that came from deep in my chest. It was a nonsensical plea for Gio to fuck me, to mark me on the inside as well.

“I’m going to fuck you until you’re just as addicted to me as I am to you.”

I whimpered, “I’m already there, Gio.”

He groaned and rested his forehead against mine, not moving or speaking, just breathing hard as he kept his eyes closed.

“I can never give you the kind of sweet you deserve. I can never make love to you, *cara*.”

Didn’t he know I didn’t want all that? If not, he would right now. “Have I ever asked for any of that?” He pulled back and opened his eyes, looking down at me. “I want it hard and rough, Gio.”

He was so tense and hard as he hovered above me.

“No one else will have you, Tatiana. You’re mine.”

Gio was off me a second later and roughly flipped me over, so my belly was to the mattress and my ass was propped up.

I loved how he always manhandled me, moving me around like I was a little Russian doll as he called me, for him to do with as he pleased.

“Spread wider.” He breathed those words, his warm breath brushing along the length of my spine.

When I didn’t obey fast enough, he slid his hands between my legs, curled his fingers painfully into my skin, and pulled my thighs open.

“My good girl showing Daddy what he wants.”

Dizziness swirled around me, and I braced my upper body on my elbows, my nipples brushing against the bedcovers and causing the peaks to become even more sensitive.

A broken moan left me when I felt Gio palming my ass and spreading my cheeks. Cool air teased the most forbidden part of me.

“Not tonight but soon, Tatiana baby, I’m going to slide my dick deep into this tight, little hole and fuck your ass, come deep inside, and mark you there too.”

His fingers dug into the flesh before giving my ass cheek a hard spank. “I’ve jerked off to the thought and image of you, *cara*.”

I moaned and let my head hang between my shoulders, just absorbing the feeling of his hands on my ass as he kneaded the cheeks.

“I lay in my bed and came all over my stomach. Thick, white ropes I wanted to plant deep inside of you.”

He’s about to make me come, and he hasn’t even touched me yet.

He made me feel so small, dainty, like he could break me in half.

God, I wanted that.

He moved down so his lips were at the small of my back, and then he spread my ass cheeks again and blew warm air along my asshole.

“*Christ*, I’m going to enjoy this,” he said low and deep and then growled up at me. “Just wait until you feel my tongue on this perfect little hole.”

I closed my eyes and rested my forehead on the mattress, trying to think straight and take enough oxygen into my lungs.

I wanted him so badly.

“I’m going to break in this little virgin ass just like I did your incredible cunt.”

And then he was dragging his tongue between my cheeks and licking my asshole. I gasped and snapped my head back up, looking at him over my shoulder. This was so wrong, but God did it feel… unbelievable.

And the entire time he flattened his tongue and licked my hole, he stared at me. He never took his focus off my eyes.

This should have felt wrong and wholly dirty, but the sight of Gio’s big, tattooed hands keeping my cheeks spread wide so he could eat out that part of me turned me on so much.

With one last long, lingering lick, he pulled back, gripped my waist, and flipped me onto my back again. My tits shook, and my thighs stayed spread nice and wide for him.

Gio knelt between my legs, gripped his cock, and looked at my pussy that was glossy with need, his dick a steel rod jutting right toward me, right to where we both craved for it to be buried.

He gripped his length and lined it up at my pussy hole, notching the head at my entrance. And when he pushed it in just a little, he stayed still, keeping me stretched.

“You ready?”

I knew he didn’t really want an answer. He was going to do whatever he wanted. He was going to fuck me the way *he* wanted to.

And so I didn’t answer.

Gio smirked, then thrust inside me hard and deep and in one smooth motion.

“Oh God!” I cried out, feeling my eyes going wide. I knew I looked as shocked as I felt.

He pulled out and shoved back in. Hard. Brutally.

The air left me so violently I shook from the force.

“How does that feel?” he snarled. “That hurt, baby?”

I nodded and groaned, “Yes. Сделай так, чтобы было больно, чтобы было приятно, Джио.” *Make it hurt so good*.

And then he pounded into me. I had no option, no choice, but to accept what he gave, to accept all of him. And I had never wanted anything more at that moment.

“That’s it. My beautiful girl.” He stared at where he was buried, watching his cock tunnel in and out of me. My muscles clenched around his thickness, making it hurt a little more. I was going to come soon. God, it was so close to the surface.

I couldn't control the sounds coming from me. But I could tell they turned him on.

He was being rough, slamming in and out of me, the sounds of wet flesh slapping together filling my ears.

Gio growled, baring his teeth and reaching down to pull and tweak at my clit. He did this repeatedly, moving his slick fingers to flick around my hard, little bead, drawing more cries of pleasure from me.

“I will be the only thing you see, Tatiana.” He pulled out and pushed back in. “I’ll be the only fucking thing you think about, hear, and smell, sweet girl.”

“Yes,” I moaned and thrashed my head back and forth as he kept rubbing my clit.

“I’m going to ruin you for everyone and everything but me.”

He was brutal as he fucked me, as he pounded into me with such an intensity, I felt lost from the sensations. His thrusts were savage and consumed every part of me.

“You’re such a beautiful, good girl, taking all of me. Listen to you begging and whimpering for what only I can give you.” He snarled, his hips

slamming against me, the *slap-slap-slap* of his pelvis connecting with mine growing louder.

God, the feel of his cock tunneling into my body, the sound of wet flesh echoing in the room, fueled both of us on. I held on to him, my fingers around his wrists, as he pressed his hands down on my hips, keeping me in place.

“Killing that motherfucker who touched you made me feel fucking incredible.” He leaned down so his face was close to mine. “I’ll gut anyone who touches you.” He sounded feral, his gaze scanning all over my belly and chest and landing on my throat. “I want all of you until I’m suffocating.” Gio placed a hand on his chest, right over his heart, and stared into my eyes. “I’m damaged and broken and as dark as hell can get.” His palm started rubbing slow circles over his chest. “You’re already buried deep in here, *cara*.”

“I—” Any words froze on my tongue when he started fucking me. And then he had his hand on my throat, cutting off most of my air as well. I closed my eyes, and he growled.

“*Look at me*.” His tone let me know he was not to be denied.

I obeyed instantly. Sweat dripped from his temples and landed on my breasts.

“Milk my cock, Tatiana. Work for my cum.” He kept pumping into me so hard and fast I had to reach behind me and place a palm on the headboard to steady myself.

“Give me this sweet fucking pussy. Squeeze that cunt around me. *Right fucking now*.” He gripped my throat a little firmer, and I felt my pleasure peak.

I moaned out my orgasm, my entire body seizing beneath Gio, my inner muscles clamping down on his cock.

“*Eccomi, principessa. Prenderai tutto. Fino all'ultima goccia*.”

“What?” I squeaked out, and he loosened his grip.

“Here I come, princess. You'll take all of it. Every drop.” His body tightened, and then he followed me right over the edge.

Gio threw his head back, his throat muscles clenching under his inked-up skin. He roared so loud I swore my brothers’ guards would hear.

After my orgasm faded, I stared at Gio, my eyes feeling huge. He seemed to come so long; his orgasm never-ending. He shot so much into

me, still connected, that I felt his seed slip out from between my pussy and his cock.

It seemed like an eternity before he finally relaxed and exhaled a powerful breath. He let go of my throat when he started getting off, and now he had his hands on the mattress on either side of my hips. His head hung forward between his shoulders, and his chest rose and fell with his intense breathing.

"*Fuck*, Tatiana," Gio breathed, and then he sat back and stared at where he had just been buried. He pulled out, and I gasped at how sensitive I was. He seemed transfixed as he watched his cum slip out of me. I felt his thick wetness slipping down the crack of my ass.

"So fucking hot." Gio reached down and gathered up all that cum and pushed his fingers back into me. "Gonna make sure every drop stays inside of you."

"There must be something wrong with me," I whispered, and he cocked an eyebrow, slowly pushing that finger in and out of me. "Because I find it hot too that you are pushing your cum back in."

The grin he flashed me was… genuine. And then he chuckled, and I felt my heart skip a little at the sound. There was always an undertone of predatory fierceness, of bottled rage that he exuded. But right now, he seemed… happy.

And it's because of me.

I felt the heavy weight of sleep settling over me.

That easy smile of his soon turned into one of male satisfaction, and I laughed.

I parted my lips, those three words I wanted to utter so badly right on the tip of my tongue. But when he lay beside me and curled his big, hard body around mine, I pursed my lips and closed my eyes.

Eventually, I wouldn't be able to hold those words in any longer, and I was scared as hell that once I uttered them, it would ruin everything.

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TATIANA

TWO WEEKS LATER

I didn’t have to look at the results to know what my fate was.

I’d known from the moment I missed my period that my future was sealed. But I waited two weeks to sneak off—as in go *anywhere* without informing someone first—to the store and get a test, terrified of seeing two pink lines staring back at me.

I procrastinated, telling myself my brothers would find out where I was going when their guard dogs followed me. Which they did. But I bought tampons, too, slipping the test into my purse after paying for both in cash. And I sure as hell made sure I dropped the plastic bag on the sidewalk as soon as I stepped out of the store, said tampons falling out, so I had to pick up the box for everyone to see.

The guard dogs were always hidden, more or less, but I knew they fucking saw, and that’s all I needed to ensure my brothers had a satisfactory answer when they asked what I bought.

For long seconds, I just stood in front of my bathroom mirror, my eyes closed, my mind a whirl of uncertainty.

I’d always been a pawn, a chess piece for everyone else to play. My life had never really been mine. Not really.

Not until my brothers took over the Desolation Bratva had I seen what it felt like to actually have any semblance of freedom for the first time in my life.

And then I met *him,* and I'd gone against the rules and done whatever the hell I wanted to.

I felt a rush when I was with Gio. He made me feel alive and wanted and like there was no one else on the planet that mattered more to him than me.

Maybe it was my wishful thinking. Maybe I read way too much into it all. But I held on to that like I was in the middle of the ocean and it was my life preserver, or I'd drown.

"Stop being a coward. You already know the results," I whispered as I forced myself to gaze at my reflection.

I grabbed the pregnancy test sitting on the counter and flipped it so that the screen was face down, and I took a slow, deep breath in.

I lowered my head and, with shaky fingers, flipped it over and stared at the results. The two lines that showed were bright pink.

Like *bright* fucking pink.

No denying it at all.

I was good and knocked up by Gio.

No shock filled me. There wasn't even any nervousness.

I felt… nothing for long seconds as I just stared at those twin lines.

And that feeling of nothingness terrified me more than anything else.

More than the baby growing inside me whose father was not only family by marriage but Head of the West Coast Italian Mafia.

God… Gio.

A fighter, a brutal and savage beast of a man who rivaled my brothers' aggression and power, had gotten me pregnant.

I set the test back down and braced my hands on the edge of the vanity. My head automatically hung forward as if I didn't have the strength to keep it up.

At that moment, all I could think of was the ramifications that would happen over this.

My worry and fear grew at the thought of what my brothers would do to Gio once they found out. And they would. No matter how long I kept his identity hidden, the truth would come out eventually.

I looked at my flat stomach and placed a hand over it, gripping my shirt and pulling it up. The pale expanse of my abdomen showed no sign that life was growing within it. I wondered what I'd look like big and swollen.

I felt myself choke up. The fear I felt for the unknown terrified me.

I *loved* him. And because of those feelings and my actions, there would be drastic repercussions.

I was in love with him.

God, I thought to myself. *I royally fucked up this time.*

There were always options, but that very thought twisted my stomach painfully.

That wasn't an option for me.

Gio and I had never talked about anything serious. He said things in the heat of the moment, but I didn't let myself cling to them. I didn't want to hope there was more than there was.

Our encounters had been wild, animalistic, and sexually deviant. I was his little Russian doll.

The way he spoke to me, touched my body… fucked me, all confirmed how physical our relationship was.

And maybe that's all there was between us.

Right?

Not anymore.

Could he want this baby? Would he be upset or maybe leave?

How badly would this tear up the family and drive a wedge between us?

How long can I hide this?

The sound of my cell phone vibrating with an incoming text drew me from my thoughts, and I picked it up, staring at the screen.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Be ready for when I return, cara. You'll be gagging on my cock before I fill you up.

My insides clenched painfully—pleasurably—at his text. It was so crude, so obscene, and all I could do was accept it all because there was no other option for me.

Gio was it, and there was no going back.

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TATIANA

I didn’t know how much time had passed since I’d stared down at that pregnancy test and saw how my future would go.

Days, maybe a week. Time just seemed to mesh together, if I was being honest.

I hadn’t seen Gio since then, not because I'd been keeping my distance but because he’d gone back to the West Coast for work. But the texts I got from him were daily, and although raunchy, I sensed a lighter, softer note in each one.

Like when he’d ask how I was and wanted me to elaborate.

Or when he’d send me a random text saying he was thinking about me.

But would he still feel that way when I finally told him about the baby?

I placed a hand on my belly but quickly removed it, as the last thing I needed was for someone to see and jump to conclusions.

I took a deep breath and exhaled, steadying myself, because at this particular moment, I had to focus on the here and now.

And that was because Dmitry had gone and gotten himself married.

Not just married to someone he ran into or even an arranged marriage to another family. No… to Claudia Bianchi.

Dmitry had wed Gio and Amara’s sister.

I guess we really were keeping it in the damn family.

They’d had a low-key ceremony just an hour before, and having everyone close to us gathered for the nuptials made my thoughts clear for

the first time in forever.

Seeing Gio after a week felt like an eternity had passed.

God, I had it bad for him.

And pretending to have no feelings for him, acting like he was just my sisters-in-law's brother, was a hell of a lot harder than anyone could guess.

The door to one of my favorite little French restaurants was held open for us. I stepped inside, behind everyone else except Gio, who was right behind me. I felt his towering frame so close, sensed his body heat seeping into me. I swore I felt his breath tease the tendrils of my hair and heard him inhale deeply.

But I focused on placing one foot in front of the other and stared at the massive, crystal chandelier that hung in the center of the large room. Everyone was dressed in their best, and I smiled as all the patrons stared in awe at the beauty who was my new sister-in-law, Claudia, as she made her way through the establishment in her wedding gown.

Pierre, the owner, came out from the back to greet us. He shook Nikolai and Dmitry's hands, his grin splitting wide when my brothers accepted the gesture.

We were led to a table, Pierre assuring us it was the best one in his restaurant. Once we were all seated, he snapped his fingers. The waitstaff bustled over and made sure all our crystal glasses were filled with artisan water.

The owner grinned from ear to ear as he doted on my brothers.

A wine glass was set in front of me, and panic washed over me, as I knew I couldn't drink it. But would abstaining be like a neon sign that I was pregnant?

Liquor was poured for the men, and a childproof cup of chocolate milk was brought out for Luca.

Dmitry reached over and pulled Claudia's chair close to his. He threw his arm over the back of it, the tips of his fingers lightly stroking the bare skin of her arm. Watching the pure happiness that was on my brothers' faces was something I didn't think I'd ever get to witness.

And it made me feel like everything was right in the world.

Dmitry and Nikolai started speaking in low voices to each other, and I had this tingling on the back of my neck. I didn't have to look at Gio to know he was staring at me.

I grabbed my water glass and took a long sip but nearly choked on it when I felt a heavy, warm hand land on my thigh.

I did pretty damn well at not snapping my head toward Gio and silently asking him what in the fuck he was doing.

My breathing was visibly changing—I felt it start to pick up. My fingers twitched, my hands shaking as I gripped my water glass, when he pushed the fabric of my dress all the way up my leg. He skimmed his fingers over my bare skin, and I felt goose bumps move along my entire body.

I shouldn't have, but I did turn my head and glance at him. And that sexy bastard was looking straight ahead, his focus on my brothers, a muscle under his jaw flexing.

He moved his fingers to the edge of my panties and teased the skin just beneath, gently following it down between my thighs until he brushed that sensitive spot where my leg and pussy met.

Self-preservation rose up, and I placed my hand on top of his, trying to stop him. The last thing I needed was for my brothers to catch on to what was happening and shoot Gio right there at the table.

Although he didn't make a sound, I swore I heard his deep chuckle echoing in my head, as if he were up to the challenge of showing me he'd damn well do whatever the hell he wanted.

He tightened his fingers against my flesh, demonstrating to me that he was much stronger and determined to make… *this* happen.

My pussy got wet at that thought and realization.

Being in the middle of a restaurant with my family all around, customers eating a stone's throw away, and Gio touching my panty-covered pussy was so wrong it was good. Beads of sweat started forming on my temple, and trying to act "normal" was getting harder by the second.

Two waitresses came by with trays full of the first course. And the entire time the dishes were being laid out, Gio kept rubbing my slit through the lace. I glanced around the table, but no one seemed to pay me any attention. Although, Claudia seemed… off, and I couldn't figure out why. She was also sweating slightly, perspiration dotting her upper lip and forehead, her cheeks pink.

God, it's hot in here.

I clenched my legs together, trying to let Gio know he had to stop.

I sensed him shift in his chair, leaning a bit closer to me. "Keep fighting me. I'm sporting a raging fucking hard-on right now because of it." He

added more pressure to my leg. “But I know you really want to open up for me.”

His voice was low enough—along with all the chatter in the room—that I knew I was the only one to hear his words.

I did as he said, and Gio ran his finger down the center of my pussy, gently pressing the gusset of my panties against my opening. I tried to hold in my moan, but a squeak escaped, and I worried that I sounded like a dying animal.

But everyone was still engrossed in their own conversation and paid us no mind.

Gio leaned back in his chair like a king getting his fill of… everything.

And that *everything* was me.

After taking a long drink from my water glass to help the parched feeling of my throat, I set it down and placed my hand on his again, praying like hell he’d quit.

I didn’t want him to stop because I wasn't thoroughly enjoying this; it was because I feared someone at this table would see. Then all hell would break loose. I grabbed on to that Petrov fire within me and looked at him, narrowing my eyes and pursing my lips. I wanted him to see he was pissing me off.

He was already staring at me, this cocky fucking smirk on his face. He leaned in at the same time he hooked his finger on the edge of my panties and pulled them aside.

And then he whispered, “Fight me, little girl. Like I said, all that does is make my cock harder.” And then he smoothed that digit over my slick, bared pussy, chuckling deep in his chest. “Your cunt is all primed for me.” And then he was leaning back in his chair like nothing happened, and I wondered if I’d imagined it all.

Gio pushed a thick, calloused finger into me, and I bit the inside of my cheek. My inner muscles clenched with the memory of his girthy cock wedging inside of me, stretching me, making it hurt so good.

Nikolai started conversing with Gio, and I had to draw up every ounce of strength I had to act totally unaffected.

With one more thrust of his finger into me, Gio finally removed it, adjusted my dress, and grabbed his wine glass just as the food arrived. He glanced at me as he took a drink, and I noticed his middle finger was glossy with my arousal.

Gio set the glass down, and—shocking the hell out of me… again—he sucked that digit into his mouth. Right the fuck in front of everyone.

My face felt so damn hot with embarrassment and arousal.

And with each passing second, Gio acted more closed off, and every bit the Italian Mafia leader he was.

I tried not to look at him, but I couldn't help but steal glances in his direction.

Get a damn grip.

I glanced at Amara and Nikolai, who were taking care of Luca. Dmitry had his arm over the back of his new wife's chair. I was able to focus on other things besides the fact that I was pregnant, that I'd nearly had an orgasm in the middle of a restaurant surrounded by my family, and that I was in love with Gio.

I doted on Luca, my nephew, the cutest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Nikolai, Dmitry, and Gio started talking about work, their conversation cryptic and not making any sense to anyone but them. But that didn't stop me from listening in.

"As much as you assholes annoy the hell out of me, I won't lie and say this marriage doesn't make our union even stronger," Gio said. He leaned back in his seat and braced his elbow on the arm of my chair.

I shifted as I felt his energy surrounding me.

Dmitry started talking, and when I glanced at Nikolai, I could see him staring at Gio with a strange expression on his face. It made my heart race for another reason.

Did he suspect something?

But Nikolai turned his focus to my new sister-in-law and asked, "Claudia,"—his Russian was thick—"do you know about our fight club business venture?"

I snapped my focus to Dmitry and saw my brother instantly tense.

"Nikolai," he growled and leaned forward, bracing his forearms on the table and glowering.

Nikolai smirked. "What, *brat*?" he asked with false innocence, using the Russian word for brother.

"Enough," Dmitry bit out.

But it was clear Nikolai wasn't perturbed by the clear aggression and warning pouring off Dmitry. Whatever he was doing, whatever he planned on saying, was going to continue whether the groom liked it or not.

Nikolai grinned and cast a glance at Gio before looking at Claudia again. “You should check out a fight. It’s pretty fucking incredible entertainment.”

“Language, Nikolai,” Amara chided, but we all knew he did whatever the hell he wanted, when he wanted.

“Fucking ya!” Luca shouted, a wide smile on his face as he scored points on whatever game he played.

I felt my eyes widen in surprise and covered my mouth with the back of my hand to stem off my laughter.

Nikolai chuckled and looked over at his son, but at the narrow-eyed look on Amara’s face, he sobered and shifted in his chair.

“Baby, we don’t repeat the bad words we hear Daddy say, remember?”

Luca didn’t respond as he kept playing, which had Amara sighing in frustration and casting another angry look at Nikolai before grabbing her water glass and downing it.

“I mean it, Claudia. Have your husband bring you.”

Dmitry shook his head.

There was a heavy silence that filled the table.

“I’d like to go,” I said in a low voice, staring at my brothers. I had no clue why I even said a word, let alone got involved in this. The last thing I needed to do was go to another fight when the last one I attended had been a nightmare.

But I knew I’d be safe, and there was this push and pull inside me that said I *had* to go. I had to create new memories in a place that had been so dark.

Gio didn’t look at me, but when I glanced up at him, I could see he was scowling. He gestured over to the waiter and asked for something too softly for me to hear. Only a moment later, a glass of whiskey was being set down in front of him.

He promptly tossed it back.

“I thought you said those fights were nothing but a bunch of bloodthirsty savages?” Amara wiped Luca’s face after she spoke.

“The answer is no,” Dmitry bit out. “Absolutely not.”

“It’ll be safe, brother.” Nikolai’s brows lowered. “I’ll even bring Amara. She’s been wanting to check one out since the last time she snuck her perfect ass into the underground.” He turned his head to stare at his wife. “Remember, *kotenok*?”

Nikolai leaned in and dragged his nose along the shell of her ear. I held in my cringe at seeing my brother being sexual with his wife.

“I had to kill those assholes who thought they could even look at you.”

Amara slowly blinked, and a blush spread across her cheeks. Nikolai kissed her temple before looking at Dmitry again. He held out his hands, palms up, before dropping them back down. “See? It’ll be a family outing. We’ll bring in extra security, keep a safe area sectioned off for the girls, and they can get an adrenaline rush watching D'yavol beat some poor sap to death.”

Dmitry’s jaw was clenched tightly as he squared off with Nikolai, who just smirked.

“What do you say, Gio?” Nikolai asked, saying those words slowly and with purpose.

Gio was silent for long seconds, then responded, “Maybe watching the fights will open their eyes to their world more.”

I shifted on my seat at the fact that I’d see Gio fight again, although I didn’t know who at this table knew D'yavol’s true identity.

“But don’t think I’ll let this caveman shit fly with my sisters, *Russian*,” he added.

Nikolai sobered instantly after Gio spoke, all amusement fading as he stared at the other man. “Your sisters are married. They aren’t under your protection anymore, and you sure as hell don’t make the rules.” He leaned forward and growled curses in Russian before saying, “Don’t think you can tell *me* what to do.”

“Okay,” Amara said. “That’s enough. Claudia just got married, and this is supposed to be a nice after-ceremony meal. All of you are ruining it.” The anger in my sister-in-law’s voice was thick and made me proud as hell that she stood up to these Neanderthals.

Nikolai leaned back in his chair, Gio shut up, and Dmitry laughed softly.

And just like that, the atmosphere changed. Everyone calmed the hell down, and we had a nice rest of the afternoon.

But internally, I was a ball of nerves because something inside of me said this moment—tonight—was the start of everything coming to a head.

Life as I knew it was never going to be the same again.

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TATIANA

FIGHT NIGHT

We were on our way to the underground fight, and I hadn't been able to get rid of these nerves since this entire excursion was planned at our post-celebratory lunch.

I rested on the leather of the back seat in the sleek town car I was currently riding in. Nikolai was in the driver's seat and Amara in the passenger. She kept the conversation light, but mostly the soft music playing from the radio filled the silence.

"You doing okay?" Nikolai was the one to ask me, and I looked at his eyes in the rearview mirror.

"I'm fine." I could feel his worry about tonight, about what happened to me possibly triggering me to the point where I'd have a meltdown. In fact, before we'd left, both Dmitry and Nikolai tried to talk me out of going.

Nikolai's voice was calm, but I could feel the underlying tension as he spoke. "You should have never gone to the fight, Tati."

"You should have never fucking brought it up, brat*."*

I could see the guilt etched into Nikolai's expression. My brothers had always been my protectors, but they couldn't shield me from the world's darkness—from the hell we lived in—no matter how much they wanted to.

"It was stupid of me to bring it up," Nikolai muttered to himself. His voice was low, remorse laced through each word.

I looked at him, seeing a rare glimpse of vulnerability in his icy-blue eyes.

“I wasn’t thinking.” He ran a hand through his hair, his frustration evident. “What you went through at the last fight you attended….” He cursed in Russian under his breath.

My heart tightened not from the memories that threatened to surface but from the love I saw in their eyes.

“You know we’ll keep you safe, even if we failed you the last time.”

They meant every word, but they didn’t understand. I wasn’t that fragile little girl anymore who they wanted to protect. I couldn’t be.

I pulled myself back into the present. I needed this. God, I needed this like a healing balm on an open wound.

“If at any time you want to go, you just say the word. Got it?”

I nodded. “Got it.”

Before long, we were traveling through a shady-looking area, the houses appearing as if they hadn’t been lived in or tended to in decades.

The neighborhood opened up to a more industrial area with the river our city was built around running parallel to the road we were on. And before I knew it, Nikolai was turning off onto a side road and then pulling into a massive, graveled lot I recognized.

With the dirty-looking river beside Butcher and Son containing the cement piles of a bridge that had long ago burned down and had never been rebuilt, the entire area resembled a cemetery at this point, tombstones and all.

We stayed in the car for several minutes, none of us speaking. Finally, Dmitry’s car pulled up beside us. We all climbed out, and I stared up at the building, me in the center of the group with Claudia to my right and Dmitry caging her in and Amara to my left with Nikolai taking up the end.

I was also very aware of the men who were stationed around the dilapidated building. Extra men my brothers ordered to come here to make sure there was additional security, since the three most important females in their lives would be present for the fights tonight.

“Anyone see or hear from Gio?” Amara was the one to ask, and Nikolai answered right away.

“He’ll join us later.”

I’d seen him already this morning—something no one in my party knew. He’d woken me the way he always did, with his mouth between my legs.

I tipped my head back and saw faded writing above the large bay doors I hadn’t noticed last time, but I couldn’t read it clearly, as it was too aged and sun-washed.

We were led toward a steel door at the back of the warehouse. It opened before we even got to it, and a huge man stepped to the side. He averted his eyes when Dmitry approached, murmured something in Russian, which my brother grunted in response to. He stepped farther aside, and all of us went inside.

Instantly, the scent of old and wet filled my nostrils, and I crinkled my nose before placing my hand over it. Even though I’d come to an underground fight before, I knew I’d never get used to this scent.

There was the very clear and distinct stench of aged blood from too many bodies finding their last resting place before they were buried or disposed of.

Amara shivered next to me, and Nikolai murmured something only she could hear.

A few moments later, we stopped in front of another door, which opened, the loud squeak of metal grating against metal filling my ears.

We were greeted with a staircase that descended, which was similar to the one I experienced when I arrived at my first and only fight. A chill went up my spine.

And although being here was a huge trigger for my trauma, knowing my brothers and Gio were here and that I felt stronger than I ever had before made the entire situation tolerable.

The feeling of guards watching us was tangible. We couldn't see them, but we knew they’d be there if shit went down.

The deeper we went, the louder the noise became. When we reached the bottom and turned the corner, we followed a long underground corridor, and I sensed we were moving away from the basement where the last fight I saw was. And after a few tense minutes of our steps echoing off the empty hall’s walls, it was so silent. One more door was opened for us, and the sudden loud noise of shouting and cheering let me know it had been that eerily quiet because the room was soundproof.

Stepping through, I saw the massive underground fighting circuit. This was a different location, which also had a different setup from the last place I was at, so that seemed to help settle my nerves. But seeing all the people

crowded into the bowels of this place had my blood pressure rising and my heart rate increasing.

Metal beams lined the entire ceiling overhead, and rusty-caged lights hung from them. Looking back down, I stared at the ring erected in the center of the immense space.

After we went down one last flight of stairs, which took us from the now obvious VIP entrance to the main floor—that had a couple of other entrances everyone else used—there were several men who came up to my brothers to speak with them. And although they had to speak louder than normal to be heard over the boisterous crowd surrounding us, I still couldn't make out a word of their conversation.

We started moving through the horde again, and people parted for us like they knew danger was knocking. The men glanced to the ground, knowing this family was led by two predators, but the women… the women openly showed their desire for my brothers. They clearly didn't give a shit that the two men sandwiching me had their wives pressed tightly to their sides and showed their possessive affection only to them.

I spotted chairs placed right in front of the ring. Nikolai took one chair at the end, and Amara sat right beside him. He had his arm slung over her shoulders and pulled her closer to say something in her ear. Something that had her cheeks turning red.

I sat down in the chair beside Amara. The more I searched the area, taking in this new arena, the more I found myself anticipating seeing Gio. Was he coming as a spectator? Or would he be fighting?

Dmitry took the chair at the other end of our row with Claudia sitting between him and me. I glanced at my new sister-in-law and gave her a warm smile, although I wondered if it looked as nervous as I felt right now.

I smoothed my hands over my thighs and glanced around once again. I saw men dressed in dark fatigues close to where we were seated and could almost smell the Russian guard-dog vibe pouring off them.

The noise was so loud it was deafening.

God, this place is utter chaos.

After a few minutes, everyone in the room suddenly went absolutely wild, the volume inside this underground space becoming completely overwhelming. Apparently, they'd seen someone come through one of the many doors along the perimeter because, a moment later, a massive man jumped into the ring. He had dark-red hair that was buzzed close to his

head, and there was a crazy looking dragon tattoo that covered one of his shoulders, the hind legs and wings draping down his arm.

Anticipation and adrenaline raced through my veins when everyone went totally quiet, as if they knew something fucked up was about to happen.

And then—pandemonium.

The people who were in the very few areas with seating stood up and shouted, raising their hands in the air as they screamed angry, violent things along with everyone else besides us.

I leaned in close to Amara, my sister-in-law pregnant with my niece or second nephew, and I rubbed her arm in support. The noise was obviously too much for her, and I was about to tell Nikolai to leave with his wife when my brother sensed her unease and pushed the long fall of her hair off her shoulder. He leaned in and said something to her. She shook her head, and he gave her a narrow-eyed look and made a huff of irritation that he clearly wasn't getting his way.

He reached into his pocket and handed her a pair of earplugs, which she took and put in with a grateful smile. He offered me a pair, and I was tempted to take them, but I decided to wave him off, hoping it would give him the impression I wasn't as weak as he and our brother thought I was. I assumed Dmitry gave Claudia the option as well, but I was too focused on the ring and what was to come.

To my left, I saw people moving out of the way and sat up straighter, trying to catch a glimpse of who was weaving through the crowd. Although, I already knew. God, I knew it was *him*. I felt the charge of electricity in the air.

And then I saw him.

He was a head taller than everyone else.

When he climbed into the cage, I couldn't help but stare at Gio in all his vicious, intense, and highly addictive glory.

A skull mask covered the lower half of his face once again, and he wore black shorts, tape wrapped around his knuckles, and nothing else.

Everyone was shouting, "D'yavol!" But all that noise faded as soon as my eyes landed on Gio.

I glanced at Amara, and her expression was too confusing for me to tell if she was aware this was her brother. But when I peeked over at Claudia, her look told me all I needed to know.

She’d already known who she would be watching fight tonight. But how?

As if my thoughts were shouted for all to hear, Amara looked at her sister, her eyes wide as they bounced between Claudia and D'yavol.

Yup. Now, she knew, too.

But like a negative and positive magnet, my eyes were drawn back to Gio. Yet, it was Claudia and Dmitry talking beside me, loudly enough I could hear their words, that had my ears focused on them. And since I was a nosy bitch, I eavesdropped.

“Why don’t you look surprised, little wife?”

“I wasn’t snooping!” Claudia blurted out, and I could tell she hadn’t meant to say it.

Even though I was staring at my tattooed dream man inside the ring, I was totally focused on the two people beside me. I felt my eyebrows rise a little in surprise at Claudia’s high-pitched yet haughty tone. To say I was eager to hear the rest was an understatement.

“But I found paperwork.”

Paperwork?

“And I realized D'yavol was Gio. Figured it out from his signature.”

What in the hell are they talking about? How could Claudia find out D'yavol’s identity from paperwork?

I looked at Nikolai and then Dmitry, and then it clicked.

Even if this was illegal underground fighting, my brothers would have made sure they had their asses covered. So there had to be some kind of contract between my brothers and Gio for him to fight for Nikolai and Dmitry, and why the Head of the West Coast *Italian* Mafia had chosen a *Russian* name as his alias.

“We sign the letter A of our last name with the same flourish at the top. Always have, ever since I saw his signature when I was young and thought it was pretty, so I started doing it, too. It was the same stylized A in D’yavol’s signature,” Claudia murmured but not soft enough that I didn’t hear her. In fact, really being nosy, I leaned toward her so I could catch the words clearly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Dmitry was the one to speak now, his voice even. “Before marrying you, it wasn’t my place to tell you what your brother did in his free time.”

“And *after* marrying me?” Claudia asked, her tone accusing.

I glanced out the corner of my eye to see Dmitry looking at Gio. My brother exhaled roughly, and I was shocked to see he looked almost… guilty—an emotion I didn't know he could feel—before speaking. "I would've told you everything. I planned on doing it, but then Nikolai pulled his shit at dinner after our wedding. This wasn't how I wanted you to find out, even though I knew you would eventually."

The noise rose slightly, so I couldn't make out whatever Dmitry was now saying, but I picked up on the last bit, and my heart raced because I knew… I *knew* it was the truth.

"Some people need an outlet, sweet girl. Some people need to feel like they are nobody and the same as everybody else all in the same breath."

I closed my eyes after he spoke, remembering the intimate conversation I had with Gio, when he'd said as much to me. He bared his soul in that moment, revealing things I knew he'd always kept buried.

It made me love him even more in *this* moment, hearing the same thing from my big brother.

The fight started, and I opened my eyes to take in all the carnage.

The way Gio fought was vicious. He was strategic with his moves, yet the fight seemed to go on forever. But before I knew it, the fight ended, and my man stood over the unmoving body of his opponent.

For a moment, I thought he killed the other man, but I could see the slight twitching of the beaten fighter's fingers and the irregular rise and fall of his chest.

A few men came into the cage and pulled the loser out, dragging his nearly lifeless body off and out of sight. Blood smeared along the already stained, white mat in a showcase of the brutality we all just witnessed.

The crowd went insane, and I couldn't look away from the father of the baby he didn't yet know that grew inside me. He stood in the center of the ring, his chest covered with a mixture of sweat and blood. His head was slightly lowered, and he gazed at me.

And then Gio was out of the cage and disappeared into the crowd.

After a suspended moment, the five of us stood, and we were led through the sea of bodies into a darkened hallway.

My heart was racing because the sight of Gio all sweaty and bloody had me wet.

I was good and fucked up for that man.

And I loved it.

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TATIANA

We only walked for a few minutes before we found ourselves in a crudely erected locker room.

There was a shower room I spotted down a short hallway off to the side that we passed. There were several rows of lockers on either side of us, the majority of them dented, rusty, and banged the hell up. Towels were stacked on benches and spread out on the ground and there were a few duffle bags that belonged to the fighters.

We stood in the center of the room for a few minutes, Dmitry and Nikolai speaking in Russian, and Amara and Claudia having a quiet conversation between the two of them in Italian.

And then a door on the wall to my left, behind a row of lockers, opened and closed, and it was Gio who strode around them, freezing when he saw all of us standing there. Clearly, this was a surprise.

He still wore his skull mask, sweat dripping down his temples, with blood splattered on his chest—unrecognizable if we didn't already know who he was. But I noticed he was tense. His hands were clenched tightly, and he paced back and forth.

Then Gio stopped moving, his gaze darting between Dmitry and Nikolai, this low sound of warning leaving him. When he ripped off the skull mask and gripped the material fiercely in his fist, I could see how pissed he was.

I looked at Claudia and Amara, and by their lack of shock over the fact that the fighter was Gio, it confirmed to him they already knew of his identity before he yanked off the disguise.

“You,” he said and pointed to Nikolai. “And fucking you,” Gio hissed under his breath and stabbed his finger toward Dmitry. “Both of you bastards *actually* brought my sisters down here? I thought for sure you’d realize how fucked up it would be to bring them after that conversation the other night. What the fuck is wrong with you assholes?”

Dmitry was tense, his hand still wrapped around Claudia’s waist as he kept her back to his chest. Nikolai chuckled deeply, placing himself in front of Amara, as if he thought her brother might hurt her.

Gio flared his nostrils and ran a hand over his face. “Plus, taking them to a fight is one thing. But bringing them to the backrooms—where you clearly wanted them to see me and have my identity revealed—is another.” He snarled as he looked at me, then back at them. “And bringing *your* little sister here? Bunch of motherfuckers. The both of you, Russian assholes. You knew they'd find out it was me in that ring.” He took a step toward my brothers, and they moved the women back and behind them.

“I would’ve found out eventually,” Claudia said, and all eyes were trained on her now. “I found paperwork last night with your signature on it, *D'yavol*. I recognized your penmanship. I figured it out that way. But if I hadn’t, I would’ve known the second I saw your tattoos.”

“Which was how I knew it was you,” Amara inserted.

Gio’s nostrils flared once again, and I saw his face become red. With a disgruntled sound, he turned from us, running a hand over his short black hair.

“Your husband just had to cross that line—”

“Watch it, motherfucker,” Nikolai was the one to snarl now, not liking his wife being spoken to in any way other than submissive respect.

Everyone stayed silent, as if they were waiting for one of these three men to lose their shit.

“I made a deal with Dmitry and Nikolai in order to fight in the underground circuit. They keep the winnings, and in return, they let me fight as often as I want.” And then he spun around, fire blazing in his eyes while they shot gasoline-soaked arrows at my brothers, as he forced his next words out through gritted teeth. Loudly. “And. They. Keep. Their. Fucking. Mouths. Shut.”

It was clear all truths were coming out tonight.

“If the Cosa Nostra found out what I was doing behind their backs, making deals with the Bratva without speaking to the Head of Italy first, chaos would ensue.”

And, of course, Nikolai had to open his mouth. “Get a fucking grip, man.” Amara hissed something unintelligible at him, which had him snorting like he found this shit funny. “Your brother is over here throwing a hissy fit. From where I’m standing, watching a six-foot-five, three-hundred-pound man act all pissy that his little sisters found out he is participating in illegal fights is hilarious to me.”

“Jesus Christ, *brat*,” Dmitry muttered in annoyance. “Shut the hell up.”

Nikolai cast him a narrow-eyed glance.

At that moment, Gio quickly rounded on Nikolai, and my brother pushed Amara back even farther, barking out orders in Russian to me. I reached for Amara, even though I knew Gio would rather die than have either of his sisters get hurt. Or me, for that matter.

Gio faced off with Nikolai, his eyes going cold, the aggression pouring off him tangible enough I had no doubt everyone felt it.

I could see Nikolai grin before he moved his head back and forth on his neck to crack it, took off his suit jacket, and then rolled his shoulders.

And then, faster than I could’ve expected, Gio clocked Nikolai, right in the side of the mouth. My brother’s head whipped to the side, and I could see his lip split and blood ooze out of the fresh wound.

Amara gasped, and I took a step forward. I felt someone grab my wrist and glanced behind me to see Dmitry holding on to me while sporting a hard look.

And then with his other hand, he pulled a gun on Gio.

“No!” Claudia shouted at her husband.

Nikolai pulled his eyes off his opponent long enough to murmur, “Ты не совсем ясно мыслишь, брат. Кулачный бой это одно. Проделать дыру в голове своего шурина, это другое.” *You're not thinking clearly, brother. A fist fight is one thing. Putting a hole in your brother-in-law's head is another.*

He held his hand up, stopping our brother from coming closer. It was interesting to see Nikolai being the more level-headed of the two of them for once.

Nikolai ran his thumb over his mouth, smearing the blood before placing the digit back in front of his lips and then crudely licking it off. “That’s your free shot, Gio.”

Both men stared at each other, Gio’s chest pumping up and down, his teeth bared, and murder in his eyes. Nikolai stood there like he was bored as hell.

After long, very tense moments, Gio exhaled and scrubbed a hand over his face. It was clear he was trying to regain his control, and as the seconds passed, his aggression dimmed.

“I wasn’t purposely trying to keep this from either of you,” he finally spoke, addressing Claudia and Amara. “But I’d be lying if I didn't admit that if I could have, I would have.”

“I wish you had told us. I would’ve been there for you, rooting you on,” Claudia was the one to speak.

“We both would’ve been there for you,” Amara inserted, then took a step closer, brushing away Nikolai’s arm when he tried to stop her.

Gio cleared his throat and nodded, but he wouldn’t look at anyone. “Growing up—” He paused, then cleared his throat again. “—Father was….”

I knew where he was going with this, and my heart ached for the man I loved. I could see he was sifting through the memories of his childhood and found myself lifting a hand and placing it over my heart… which felt like it was breaking.

My gaze went to his bare arms and chest, and although I couldn't see the permanent marks that littered his flesh, I knew they were there, and they not only scarred his body but also deep inside.

“The things Father made me do, the situations I witnessed—they’re forever a part of me.” Gio’s shoulders bunched. “I did a lot of fucked-up shit.” The tension in the room increased. “And I’m forever fucked up because of it.” He looked around at everyone now.

Although he bared his soul, Gio’s expression was apathetic, like he hadn't just confessed to us his trauma.

“I fucking like it. You understand, sisters?” His voice was hard and sharp as he addressed Claudia and Amara.

I looked between the two women, who both sported the same expression.

Terror that their brother had gone through what he did and now had to deal with the aftermath in his own—albeit twisted—way of healing. And also… love. They loved their brother as much as I loved mine.

"And fighting… it helps me unleash all that hate I have inside me. It'll never go away. So I fucking embrace it." He held his hands out, palms up, as he stared at the women. "These hands have killed *many* people. They've been covered in blood, helped bury bodies, and tortured people… even some who didn't deserve it." He glanced my way then.

I could see his sisters looked nauseous, knowing this was the last thing they wanted to hear, but they let Gio get this off his chest.

He wanted them to know. He needed them to hear every word because it was a weight that was finally being lifted from him.

"Fighting has been my dark, messed-up therapy for a long time. But I feel relieved that both of you finally know what I do." He ran a hand over his sweaty, bloody face. "And I won't lie and say I didn't fight in Desolation because I wanted to be closer to my sisters. With both of you so far away, it was fucking hard on me." Although he addressed them, he looked at me then, as if he didn't care if anyone in this room picked up on his hidden, underlying meaning.

He wanted to be closer to me now, too.

Claudia was the first to make a move. She walked toward Gio and threw her arms around his waist. She rested her forehead on the center of his chest and murmured how much she loved him.

"You're so strong," she whispered but loud enough I heard. "You've always been so strong for us because you were the best big brother anyone could ask for."

She was openly crying, and I could see it was doing a number on Dmitry. My brother wanted to go to his wife, but he gave her this moment with her brother.

"You were a good son, and I'm sorry Father and Mother never saw that. I'm sorry they hurt you. I'll never leave your side."

Amara went over and wrapped her arms around Gio from his side. It took every ounce of my strength to stay put and not do the same. I glanced at my brothers, and thankfully, they were too focused on their wives to see the love I had for my Italian fighter that was no doubt clearly displayed in my expression.

“I love you, *fratellone*. We’re family, and we love you. You’re not alone.”

I held back my tears as Claudia said those words to Gio.

She and Amara pulled away, and Gio cupped one of Claudia’s cheeks and did the same to Amara with his other hand. The corner of his mouth lifted in a small, painful smile. “La mia famiglia.” *My family.*

And then he lifted his head and looked right at me, his stare hard and clear, and one that my brothers most certainly saw, if the pressure increasing in the room was anything to go by.

La mia famiglia, Gio, I thought. *You’re my family now, too.*

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TATIANA

I found myself back at Butcher and Son an hour after I left with my brothers.

With my guards thinking I was tucked away in bed, I had all night to do anything and everything I wanted with *him*.

I pushed through the thinning crowd. A few groups still lingered to watch the remaining fights, but most left after the main event with D'yavol.

It was reckless to come here alone, where danger lurked in every shadow, especially after what happened last time. But I couldn't stay away from him. Despite my fear, I felt an unfamiliar strength settle over me, empowering me in a way I couldn't explain.

I wasn't hiding who I was. Anyone in this basement could see my face and instantly know I was the sister of the infamous Petrov brothers, rulers of the Bratva in Desolation. They knew crossing me was a death sentence.

But the man who hurt me before knew exactly who I was, who my brothers were, and he still didn't care.

I forced those thoughts away. I didn't have time for fear or logic. All that mattered was being with Gio. And even though this place had haunted me, I felt different today. I felt strong.

I placed a hand on my belly and felt a flutter of my nerves.

I still hadn't told Gio—or anyone, for that matter—about the pregnancy. I didn't know when I would, but I was certain I had to do it sooner rather than later.

The closer I got to where I knew Gio was, the more excited I became. I felt like I was addicted, needing a rush that only one person could give me.

I kept to the dirty concrete wall as I made my way to the back where the locker room was. I knew there were men here who were working for my brothers. They patrolled the area and kept everyone in check, but they were easy to spot, so I kept away from them. I didn't need them calling my siblings.

I pushed open the door and stepped into the room, closing it behind me and leaning against it as I took in the dark area.

A single lightbulb hung from the ceiling, casting this weird glow that made eerie shadows.

I could hear the showers running off to my right and moved toward the short hallway without thinking. The door that led into the washroom was partially open, steam billowing out. Although this place was bare bones and rundown compared to what it used to be, they had reinforced and updated the bowels of Butcher and Son to conduct their business dealings.

I silently stepped inside, the warmth and humidity immediately surrounding me.

It took a moment for my vision to adjust to the foggy interior, but when it did, I spotted the person I came here to see standing under the spray of a showerhead.

Despite it being hours after we saw Gio fight, I knew he probably destroyed several more men in the ring after we left and was just now washing that violence off.

The room had a toilet and urinal to the right. To the left was a large shower with white tile covering the walls and floor, and three showerheads were positioned five feet apart. All clearly updated.

My heart was in my throat as I stared at Gio’s back. All that hard, tattooed flesh had my body warming, softening, and getting wetter than the water soaking him.

God, I was already drenched.

I shamelessly let my gaze travel down his broad shoulders, defined back, and stared at his

ass. He was so muscular everywhere, the percentage of his body fat no doubt miniscule.

He had his hands braced on the wall in front of him, his head lowered, the water turning pink from the blood of other men he beat the shit out of

before disappearing down the drain by his feet.

And then he slowly turned his head, and my breath caught in my throat as our eyes locked.

He stood there a moment, just staring at me, not moving as the water cascaded down his naked form. Finally, he straightened and turned around fully.

Like the shameless whore I was when it concerned him, I didn't stop myself from gazing at Gio's chiseled chest and lower until I was gawking at his gigantic cock.

God, his dick was so hard already, and I knew he'd only get bigger. The twin weights of his balls hung under his shaft, swaying slightly as he shifted on his feet.

"Why are you here, little girl?" His voice was like aged whiskey. So smooth and deep, filling every part of me.

Him calling me "little girl" shouldn't have turned me on the way it did. I licked my lips and felt my pulse race at the low growl that came from him in response.

"это чертовски безумие," I said to myself. *This is fucking crazy.* "You know why," I whispered.

"Do I?"

I glanced down at his shaft again, his cock so long and thick. I remembered how it hurt every time he forced his way inside me, making me take every single inch until tears streamed down my face, but I only begged him to fuck me harder.

"Why do you act like I'm nothing to you after all we've done?" I asked, even though I knew it was all just an act. He got turned on the same way I did when he pretended to be so… apathetic. So indifferent. I knew it was all an arousing front because, after he used me and called me his pretty slut, he'd hold me and bare his soul to me.

He tipped his head to the side, watching me with a knowing look on his too handsome face, and replied, "You know why."

I swallowed, the humidity in the room making my thin shirt stick to my chest. His gaze flicked down to my breasts, and I felt my nipples harden further. I knew he could see them through the white material, could see I was braless as well.

I'd picked this outfit on purpose.

“You like the idea of me making you my personal little whore. Isn’t that right, baby?”

I nodded slowly, twirling a strand of my hair while flicking my gaze back to his dick. I felt a trickle of wetness slide from my pussy and dampen my inner thighs. I was messed up to like that I was his sex toy.

“Use your words and tell me why you’re here. And don’t fucking lie, or I’ll spank your ass until you can’t sit comfortably.”

I closed my eyes and shivered, his words making my pussy tighten in response.

I looked him in the eye when I answered. “I want you to use me.”

His cock visibly jerked and bobbed at that.

“Use you?” he questioned.

Gio was a sadist. He liked humiliating me by forcing me to tell him my nastiest fantasies.

“Use me like I’m your slut.”

He hummed in pleasure. “Come here, baby.” He lowered his head slightly but kept his focus on me. “Come here and kneel in front of me. I’ll give you exactly what you need.”

I moved to him automatically, my mind and body knowing what it wanted. I sank to my knees and stared up at him, not caring that I was getting soaked.

His cock was so hard, thick drops of pre-cum forming at the tip before the water from the shower washed them away.

“My pretty little Russian doll wants some big, fat Italian cock. Isn’t that right?”

I nodded, already so breathless.

He gripped that enormous dick in his tattooed fist and started stroking himself lazily. “You know what would happen if your crazy-ass brothers found out I took their little sister’s virginity and have been fucking her so raw she can’t walk right the next day?”

I swayed from the force of his obscene words. “They’d probably try to kill you.”

He chuckled low and deep. “They could try,” he said in a tone that told me he didn’t give a shit or even think Dmitry and Nikolai could hurt him.

“Enough talking. I want your mouth too full of dick to utter a word.” He gripped the back of my head, using my hair as leverage while he guided the crown to my mouth.

Gio smeared his pre-cum along my mouth like it was lipstick, and I greedily licked it off. I moaned at how good and salty he tasted.

“Open wide and show me how good you suck my cock. Be my good little whore, Tatiana.”

And I did just that.

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NIKOLAI

We'd left Butcher and Son over an hour ago. Amara and Claudia had headed home, and Dmitry and I found ourselves at *Sdat'sya*, one bar we owned. The Pit was below the bar, an entry level fighting ring that held more novice fights than what we organized at Butcher and Son.

We'd stopped in to handle some business and were now seated in a booth at the rear of the bar, tossing back a few drinks before we needed to go home to our girls.

Right now, with all the shit of our world weighing down on us, we needed the noise and the vodka. The heavy bass of the music was a tangible thrum in the background. I downed my drink in one go, the burn of the alcohol doing little to ease the fire inside me.

I slammed the glass down, the sound sharp and final in the dimly lit room. Dmitry glanced over at me, his own glass clutched tight, but he didn't say a word. We both knew words were useless right now.

An MMA match was on, and both of us focused on the fight as we drank. It wasn't long before Sly found us. He approached the booth with a look on his face—one that said the task we'd given him had been successful. He had information for us.

And judging by his expression, the news wasn't going to be good.

I met Dmitry's gaze, seeing the same readiness reflected in his eyes.

"Bosses," Sly said, leaning in close so only we could hear him.

He was one of our low-level men who worked the streets. He wasn't part of the Bratva in an official sense. He wasn't even Russian. But he was fucking scared of us, and that made him loyal as hell.

"I've got news about Tatiana's attacker."

I felt Dmitry tense beside me, and I leaned forward, the air between us crackling with anticipation. When we first found out about Tatiana getting hurt, we sent out several of our men to get information that would paint us an entire picture so we could handle it accordingly.

"Well?" Dmitry growled, his patience hanging on by a thread. Just like mine.

Sly looked nervous as hell, which made me nearly snap at him to just fucking tell us already. He swallowed, and I could see him weighing his words and how to say what needed to be fucking said.

"You found out who killed him, didn't you?" my brother prompted. I felt my need for blood rise.

Sly nodded and ran a hand over his sweaty face.

"*Jesus Christ*. Spit it out before I slit your throat," I finally seethed.

"The man who killed the person who hurt your sister was Gio Bianchi," he said in a rush, his voice shaky. He took a step back, clearly sensing the darkness coming from the two of us. "Without a doubt. He's the one who took the bastard out."

For a breath of time, everything went still. I let his words—the identity of the man who killed my sister's attacker—sink in real deep.

"He might try and hide his identity, but people know. And they were afraid to say anything to me because of who he is. But when they found out both of you wanted to know, they had loose lips."

And then it all peaked. The fury I'd been holding in check snapped. There was this low rumble, and I realized it came from not only me but Dmitry as well.

I grabbed my glass, my intent to shoot back the last of my vodka, but before I knew what I was doing, glass shattered in my hand as I slammed it down on the table. Shards exploded up and outward, scattering across the booth and onto the floor.

Although I sensed a silent heaviness filling the room, patrons and employees knew better than to gawk and got back to work.

I locked my focus on Dmitry. He didn't need to say a single word. I could see the shock and betrayal in his eyes. No doubt, the cold fury I saw

in his icy expression matched my own.

“Leave us,” I spat at Sly, and he was gone a second later.

“That motherfucker,” Dmitry snarled and finished his drink.

I looked down at my hand and saw a few pieces of glass lodged in my skin, blood dripping from the open wounds and falling onto the tabletop.

I picked out the glass, wrapped my hand in a paper napkin, and said in a seething voice, “Let’s go.” My tone was like a knife slicing through the tension. I was already on my feet as soon as the words left my mouth. Dmitry was already right behind me as we strode out of the bar and toward the waiting Mercedes just outside the door.

Once in the car, I sat there, my hands curled around the steering wheel as I stared straight ahead.

“Are you thinking about what to do?” Dmitry asked in a low, deep voice that didn’t hide his anger. “Do you want to talk about what the fuck we should do?”

There was nothing left to discuss. And although we had yet to fully discuss what the fuck was going on with Maksim’s death, we were well past giving a shit.

The time to talk about any of this was over.

I could see Dmitry nodding in my peripheral vision, but I didn’t say a thing.

“Let's go, *brat*,” he told me, and I shifted the car into gear.

The drive back to Butcher and Son was a blur, and the low hum of the engine barely registered in my chaotic brain through the rush of my blood pounding in my ears. I knew Gio was still fighting. It had been hours since we left, but he’d signed up for several more fights that were set for well after the heartfelt breakdown in the locker room.

When we arrived, the rundown building loomed ahead of us. There was this dark and angry atmosphere that surrounded it.

Great. It matched the black rage simmering inside the both of us.

“Let’s get this fucking shit over with.”

Once inside, we made our way to the locker room. We pushed through the doors, and the second we stepped inside, the sound of the shower running and the steam billowing out of the short hallway told us where Gio was.

The dim light cast long, ghostly shadows on the broken tiles and cracked cement. Dmitry was right behind me, his presence a solid,

unwavering force. But as the seconds passed, I knew something was off.

The humid air hung heavy in the confines of the small space. But there was… something else—something that made the hair on my arms stand on end. I took another step toward the shower, but when I heard a gruff male groan, followed by a feminine gasp, I saw red.

I was moving before I even realized it, and when I rounded the corner, that's when I stumbled upon a scene that made my blood turn cold and my vision red.

Gio was naked and stood under the spray of water… and had my goddamn *sister* pressed up against the tiled wall. He shifted, and all I saw for a second was tattooed skin, but when he moved to the side once more, Tatiana's small form came back into view. Her hair and clothes were soaked from the shower, and she had this dazed look in her eyes as she stared, softly smiling, up at Gio.

He said something low and indistinguishable in Italian, and then he leaned down to kiss her.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion, taking hours, but I knew only seconds had probably passed. My stomach twisted with rage. Her hands were in his hair, gripping him as if she never wanted to let go. And him—he was so wrapped up in her that he didn't even notice us enter.

"Cock-sucking motherfucker," Dmitry growled under his breath.

I couldn't move. The sight of them like that sent a shock of anger through me.

My sister with fucking Gio.

My sister with fucking *any* man.

Gio should have known better. He should have known Tati was *forever* off-limits.

I hoped he lived it up because he was about to fucking regret every single choice that led him to this moment.

The fucker still hadn't noticed we were just feet from him, but as if I'd spoken out loud, Gio pulled back from my sister and looked over his shoulder at us.

There was no shock. No remorse. In fact, the motherfucker turned to face us, totally fucking naked with a massive hard-on, and grinned like the bastard he was.

"Сукин сын." *Son of a bitch*. Dmitry hissed the insult.

“Мудак.” *Asshole*. I grinned back at Gio and undid my cuffs, then loosened my tie and unfastened the first couple of buttons of my shirt. “This has been a long time coming, douchebag,” I snarled, my voice low and laced with fury.

“Oh God,” Tatiana said and, a second later, shut off the shower before stepping out from behind Gio. Her eyes were wide, and I narrowed my eyes as I took off my jacket and tossed it to her. Tatiana’s eyes met mine, and although there was shock and horror, the longer the seconds passed, the more I saw her defiance rise.

“You’re gonna regret this, motherfucker.”

Gio took a step closer, his grin spreading.

“You took something from us that wasn’t yours,” I hissed, meaning more than one thing. We’d come here to confront him about taking out Tati’s assailant. And now we found out he’d been seeing our sister.

And probably fucking her. I didn’t know for sure, since we hadn’t caught them in that intimate act—thank fucking Christ—but they’d looked way too comfortable in that moment with each other to not have been together in that way.

I was shaking with rage and sensed Dmitry was too, so it was through gritted teeth that I pointed out, “You made a move in our world without our permission.”

Not only in our world but with our sister, too.

The surrounding air thickened until it was suffocating. Violence was inevitable, and I felt my anticipation and the hum of pleasure it always brought me coursing through my veins.

God, this was going to be so fucking good.

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TATIANA

My brothers held the same expression… one I'd seen before when they lost control of their rational thinking and sanity.

This was bad and would only get worse once the three of them went on the offense.

Nikolai lunged first. My brother was fast as hell and actually landed a blow, his fist connecting with Gio's jaw with a sickening thud. Or maybe Gio let him throw the first punch. I questioned that as I stared in shock at his now bloody and busted lip and the grin he sported.

Gio wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand, his eyes narrowing as he looked between my brothers.

Before I could react, Dmitry was on him too, and the shower room erupted into a brutal, chaotic fight.

Oh God. I covered my mouth with my hands as I watched the ruthlessness.

"Stop it!" I screamed, but my voice was drowned out by the sounds of fists meeting flesh, grunts of pain, and the harsh breathing of the three men I loved more than anything else locked in a battle.

My heart was racing, pounding in my chest with this achingly hard force. My own battle waged inside me between needing to protect Gio and not getting involved because I'd known this would be the outcome.

This is all my fault.

But I knew there was no stopping this, not unless I threw myself into the mix, and that wasn't going to happen.

Gio fought back with a ferocity that matched my brothers, his eyes wild with fury. He landed a solid punch to Nikolai's temple, causing my brother to stumble. But Dmitry was on Gio then, and he was relentless.

"Please, stop!" I cried, tears now streaming down my face.

My hand instinctively went to my belly, and I gently curled my fingers into the soft flesh.

Dmitry staggered back, wiping the blood from his mouth before he dove back in. For it being a two-on-one fight, Gio was holding his own. But I wasn't surprised.

I screamed for them to stop, but it all fell on deaf ears.

The fight was inhuman, three alpha wolves battling to the death, and the tension in the room was so suffocating I gasped for air. All of the men momentarily stopped their fighting. Nikolai and Dmitry stood on either side of Gio, their eyes blazing with anger and something else… something twisted and ugly.

Dmitry took a step forward, his gaze never leaving Gio's. "You think we wouldn't find out?" His voice was low, dangerous. "Did you actually think we wouldn't know that you're the one who took out the bastard who assaulted our sister?"

Blood dripped from their faces. Dmitry's knuckles were raw and bleeding, Nikolai's eye was already swelling shut, and Gio's lip was split open. All of them sported splatters of crimson.

The sight of their violence, the brutality of their rage, was too much for me.

Fuck. I shivered from the adrenaline rush and my sopping-wet clothes sticking to my body.

Gio's expression never changed from a mask of hardened determination. He said nothing, but his jaw worked as he ground his teeth.

"You thought you could keep that truth from us?" Nikolai's voice was sharp. "You should have come to us right away. You should have told us what the fuck went down, so we could have reacted the way we fucking saw fit."

"You would have rather I let that fucker hurt Tatiana?" Gio's voice was icy cold and even. His eyes narrowed. "I didn't do it for *you* or to get your

fucking approval," he said, his tone rough. "I did it for *her* because the thought of her getting hurt twisted my gut into something ugly and painful."

Something shifted in the atmosphere.

"And Maksim?" Dmitry asked through a clenched jaw. "Was that for her, too?" The sarcasm was thick and laced with venom.

I felt the room grow colder, heavy with the weight of what was about to be said.

Nikolai was the one to speak. "You must think we are fucking morons. You thought we wouldn't hear about that either?"

Gio's jaw tightened. "Maksim was a threat." I could hear the strain in his voice. "He was working against you—against your entire family."

The looks on my brothers' faces told me they knew. But this wasn't about that. Gio had come onto their turf and taken out one of their men—it didn't matter that he was betraying them.

"And who are you to make that call?" Nikolai snapped. "He was Bratva, and that means he was ours to deal with."

Gio didn't back down. "I did what I had to. I didn't sit around and wait for the next betrayal."

For a moment, the room was deathly silent, and the space between all of us crackled with tension, as if the anger radiating off these three males was poisoning the air.

"You think taking out a traitor makes you an ally?" Nikolai sneered as he spat out the words.

"I'm not asking to be your ally. I did what had to be done." Gio left it at that.

Nikolai and Dmitry let out twin harsh laughs.

"You don't get to 'do what has to be done' in our world, motherfucker." Dmitry's gaze locked onto Gio, and I knew that, although he was family, my brothers didn't let anyone who went against them live.

I knew what would happen, and I only had a split second to make my decision to change the course of this.

"You might have saved our sister," Nikolai said quietly, but there was acid in his voice because he was no doubt thinking and remembering how he'd just found us, "but you can't undo what you've done. You know how we alone handle who fucks with us."

In a moment of desperate clarity, I did what I had to do—just like Gio. "I'm pregnant."

Those two words made everything freeze.

Long seconds of silence passed.

None of them even blinking as they just stared at me.

All three of them.

Nikolai was the first one to speak.

“What?” My brother’s voice was hoarse and laced with disbelief.

I looked between the three of them before settling on Gio. “I’m pregnant,” I whispered. I didn't need to say by who for them to know the truth.

I couldn't read Gio’s expression. He kept that emotionless void in place, but the longer we stared at each other, the more I saw something… *awaken* in his eyes.

“You’re pregnant?” he prompted, low and deep. His voice was barely audible over the pounding of my heart that filled my ears.

I nodded, tears blurring my vision. At that moment, we were the only two people in the shower room. “Yes,” I whispered back. “I’m pregnant.”

“What in the actual fuck?” Nikolai muttered and huffed.

“Un-fucking-believable,” Dmitry said, and I looked over to see my brothers still staring at me with shock.

The anger between the three of them was momentarily over, replaced by the weight of my revelation.

And then Gio moved toward me until he was close enough to touch. He reached out and gently placed his oversized hand on my stomach.

“И я думал, что это я в семье сумасшедший.” *And I thought I was the crazy one in the family.*

I wanted to laugh at Nikolai’s words, but I was locked in this overwhelming moment with the man I loved.

“My baby,” Gio said, quietly enough I knew I was the only one to hear.

“Yes.” I smiled, placing my hand over his. “I am,” I quipped and saw his lips twitch in amusement.

Gio’s eyes shone with a fierce determination. “’Bout fucking time, *baby*.”

I felt my eyes widen and snapped my head toward my brothers, who looked thoroughly disgusted.

“Well, shit, we can’t fucking kill him now,” Dmitry grumbled.

“I mean… we *can*.” Nikolai shrugged.

“You can *try*, motherfuckers,” Gio inserted, but he wasn’t looking at them. He seemed transfixed by the sight of my much smaller hand covering his.

“You’re mine, Tatiana.”

I smiled, holding back my tears. This certainly wasn’t how I wanted to or planned on telling Gio, but things didn’t always work out how we saw them in our heads.

“I know this is far from over,” Gio said, addressing my brothers. “But right now, I want to be with my girl. So, respectfully, get the fuck out.”

I closed my eyes and laughed incredulously. I expected my brothers to fight with him again, but after muttering under their breath in Russian about what a pain in the ass Gio was, they left the locker room and gave us privacy.

The room was silent as we stared at each other.

At that moment, the only thing I could hear was the promise of our future.

The three of us.

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GIO

I brought Tatiana back to my penthouse after the blowout with her brothers and the pregnancy revelation just an hour before.

The bedroom was quiet, with the only sound coming from my girl as she breathed softly while tending to me. I couldn’t keep my eyes off her as I traced the long fall of her dark-brown hair, with the strands falling over her shoulder. Her locks were wavy from being wet under the spray of the shower as she sucked my cock.

The scent of her hair nearly had me groaning. It was sweet and slightly floral, and I had to curl my fingers into my palms until my hands were tight fists, just to stop myself from reaching out and gripping it.

I sat on the edge of the bed, shirtless, the minor cuts and bruises on my face and chest a physical reminder of the fight with Dmitry and Nikolai. I still felt the rush of adrenaline from what happened in the shower, my male aggression still raging inside me.

But at the forefront of my mind was the revelation that Tatiana was pregnant with *my* baby.

The storm of emotions swirled inside me, and just as I was about to reach out and pull her in close, Tatiana stood and went into the bathroom to grab more first aid items. When she came back, I kept my hands to myself as she took care of me. Her hands were gentle as she cleaned the cut on my bottom lip.

Her touch was soft, the softest thing I'd ever felt. God, she was so careful, like she thought I'd break or that she'd cause me more pain.

The sting of her cleaning my wounds was there, but it was so minimal compared to how mesmerized I was. "I've never had anyone take care of me before," I said under my breath, not meaning to say the words out loud at all.

She glanced up, and I could see the worry etched in her eyes, the lingering tension from everything that happened earlier reflected at me.

"My mother never tended to me like that," I admitted. "And I never let Claudia and Amara see my wounds after a fight… or when my father got done beating the shit out of me." Although my sisters knew what had gone down and that I fought back, I refused to let them see the brutality that covered my body and that was now hidden under my tattoos.

I'd never uttered those words out loud, never admitted what I perceived as a weakness.

She glanced at me again, the sadness and empathy in her expression so strong I couldn't stop myself from leaning in and resting my forehead against hers. For long seconds, we stayed in that position, neither one of us moving or speaking.

We just lived in that moment, and it was fucking perfect.

"I'll always take care of you," she whispered, and then she let out a shaky breath. And just as quickly as she said it, the moment was broken, and she went back to cleaning my cuts.

I stayed silent as I let her do her thing, but I couldn't stop myself from staring at her and realizing I was the luckiest fucking bastard alive. The way she focused on me, so intent on mending my broken body, made something deep inside me stir. There was this feeling I'd never known before, one that I felt growing from the moment I killed that motherfucker for her.

I hadn't known what it was, this feeling that had multiplied within me to the point I was consumed. I was obsessed. Tatiana, my little Russian doll, was ingrained in every single part of me. There was no going back. I couldn't live without her.

My sisters had been the only things that mattered to me in my fucked-up world. They were the only ones I loved. But this… what I felt with Tatiana… was different.

She was everything.

She ran her fingers lightly over a bruise forming on my side, hidden amongst the dark lines of ink. She looked up, her gaze meeting mine since I was already staring at her. My world seemed to stop. Nothing else mattered because the only thing that existed was her.

I knew what this was. This feeling. And I wanted her to know and realize it meant everything.

“I’ve never known love like this, Tatiana,” I confessed, never having uttered these words in my life. Even though I loved my sisters, telling them was a rare occurrence. I showed them how I felt rather than using words that didn’t embody my commitment to taking care of them.

I heard her breath catch after I admitted how I felt.

“Aside from my sisters, I never thought I needed anyone else. But then you came along, and everything changed.” I reached out and cupped her cheek. “Because when I look at you, nothing else means more to me. When I stare into your blue eyes, the entire fucking world just stops.”

My gaze drifted down to her abdomen that was still flat but would grow big and swollen with my baby over the coming months.

“All I know is that I want you.”

Her eyes were wide, but she didn’t speak. Maybe she didn’t know what to say. I knew I had found myself speechless more times than I cared to count when she was around.

“Gio,” she finally said, just that one word—my name—sliding from her perfect, pink lips.

“I’d do anything for you,” I continued, my voice getting rough with emotion I never allowed myself to feel, let alone display. “Do you understand what I’m saying, Tatiana?”

She exhaled and licked her lips, but I did my best not to be transfixed by how beautiful she was. I wanted her to know without a doubt that she was mine, and I wasn’t letting her go.

“No one will ever hurt you or our baby. I swear it. I vow it, sweet girl. I’ll protect you both with everything inside me that is dark and dangerous and deadly.”

“Oh, Gio,” she said, her voice choked-up. Her eyes glistened, and I knew my girl was so full of emotion that she was going to cry. And even if they were happy tears, it broke my fucking heart to see them.

She was the one to reach out now and place her tiny hand on the side of my neck. Could she feel how fast my pulse was racing? She moved closer,

her little body dwarfed by my own. And when my girl brushed her lips against mine, her kiss spoke volumes.

It was a kiss that told me she knew what I wanted, what I demanded, and she accepted. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in tight, curling my body around hers because I craved to have her as close as possible.

I needed to know this was real.

“I love you, Gio,” she finally told me—the words I realized I'd desperately needed to hear.

I pulled back and cupped both sides of her face.

“I’ve wanted to tell you since the beginning. I’ve wanted to tell you when you were deep inside me that first time and all the times after. I wanted to tell you there was nothing else in the whole world that mattered except you and me,” she confessed, and I nodded.

“It’s only ever going to be you and me… and this little one.” I placed my hand on her belly and felt this surge of happiness slam into me. God, it felt good knowing she carried my child and that she loved me.

This was heaven.

She was heaven.

“Amore mio. Tu e il nostro bambino siete tutto per me.” *My love. You and our baby mean everything to me.*

I lifted her and took her to bed—our bed—because this was where she belonged from this point on. Right next to me.

Who knew the devil could find happiness when he’d only ever known hell?

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GIO

DAYS LATER

I'd called this meeting with Dmitry and Nikolai since all of this shit between us had to come to a stop. We needed to settle this because I wasn't giving up Tatiana. In fact, I planned on making her mine in all ways. It wasn't enough that she was *mine* and the mother of my baby and all future children. I wanted to make her my wife, too.

Even days later, the tension between the three of us was so thick, even a fucking knife couldn't cut through it.

As I sat across from Dmitry and Nikolai, the weight of the situation bore down on us like an anvil hanging over our heads. Nikolai sipped on a whiskey, and Dmitry drummed his fingers on the tabletop. Both of their blue gazes were laser-locked on me.

But while the tension between us was fucking suffocating, it wasn't anything I couldn't handle. I was pleased to see Nikolai's black-and-blue eye and the cut on his cheek, and Dmitry sporting a busted-as-fuck lip and bruising on his neck.

All three of us had bruised and scabbed knuckles.

We'd met at a neutral bar, one that was a "safe" place for all parties. I'd promised Tatiana I wouldn't get into another brawl with her brothers—or, at the very least, I wouldn't kill them.

If I were being honest, I wasn't sure I'd ever felt such violence directed at me like I did right now with Dmitry and Nikolai staring at me. I'm sure

they were envisioning all the ways they could kill me in the same way I was with them.

The silence and barely restrained aggression reflected from both sides. I was pretty sure, right at this moment, there was nothing as dangerous in the entire world as the three of us.

“Let’s just cut through any pleasantries,” Dmitry finally tossed in, Nikolai snorting smugly after his brother spoke.

I shrugged and leaned back. “I killed that fucker because he was hurting Tatiana. In fact, you bastards should say thank you.” They both kept apathetic expressions, but I didn't miss the way their jaws clenched after my statement. “He had planned on killing her just to get at you guys.” I hated fucking talking about it like this… like I did a damn job.

Sure, I didn’t have the strength of these feelings for Tatiana when I killed that fucker, but something had made me take his life other than just my thirst for blood. I would have beaten any motherfucker to a goddamn pulp for hurting a woman, but I’d known actually killing someone on the Petrovs’ turf—other than the fighters inside the cage—could cause issues. Yet, I’d done it anyway for Tatiana, and I wanted these fuckers to see it the way it was.

My patience was fraying. “I killed that fucker because Tatiana deserved better. She deserves someone who will protect her at all costs. No matter what.”

“Why didn’t you come to us after?”

I met Nikolai's gaze head-on.

“Arrogant as fuck to think you had the right to act on your own. To not even let us know you killed on our territory without approval—what was that?”

I didn't respond because that was the least of the issues we had. And when the Petrovs glanced at each other, I knew they realized that as well.

“What’s the fucking deal with Maksim?”

I thought about Dmitry’s words and how much I should reveal. At the end of this, I knew I had to be honest, at least partially. “I was given orders,” I replied, my words sharp. “You know how shit goes down when we’re given orders.”

Nikolai laughed. “Fucker, we don’t follow orders. We give them.”

I had the urge to roll my eyes like I was an adolescent.

We all had to follow orders. The Petrovs were powerful, but there was always someone above everyone.

I couldn't tell them everything—couldn't reveal I had my own issues with the Cosa Nostra, that I was sure Carmine was doing rogue shit. I couldn't drag the leader of Italy into it, at least not yet. I needed to wait and see how this played out first.

"And because of those orders, I did what needed to be done."

Dmitry's jaw tightened. It was clear he wanted more information from me. "Orders from who?"

I smirked at him and didn't break eye contact. "Come on, motherfucker. Like I'm going to give you more than I have to." I shrugged. "You know how this works."

Nikolai scoffed, shaking his head. "The arrogance of this fucker. Pretty wild you think that you get to take out our men on our territory, and we're just supposed to accept it?"

The room fell into a heavier silence. My mind raced with the immediate issue, but the more I thought about Carmine, the more it settled that I was in this shit because of him and his directive.

The Head of Italy—who I was supposed to trust above all else because he was *famiglia*—was keeping things from me. And I couldn't shake the feeling that Carmine was playing a game… that he was playing *me*… in order to better his own position.

He was putting everything and everyone at risk. I had to find out what the fuck was going on. Although I knew I could dig and find this shit out for myself, I knew having the Bratva on my side could help expedite that.

Hell, if he was using me, using the Cosa Nostra as pawns, I needed to know. I needed to find out as soon as possible before anything else happened.

I was about to bring up the Carmine situation with the Petrovs when Dmitry's deep voice cut through my thoughts.

"And what about Tatiana?" he asked low, with obvious hints of brotherly protection woven in his tone.

I felt my own protectiveness over my girl rise. "What about her?" I growled, matching his aggression.

If they even try to start any bullshit about me not keeping her as mine, I'll have to break my promise to Tatiana that I won't kill them.

“You got her pregnant.” Nikolai's voice was a mixture of royally pissed off and slightly disgusted at the idea that I’d knocked up his sister.

I felt male pride and possessiveness over it.

I clenched my jaw but didn’t have time to respond before they were talking again.

“What’s your plan?”

I counted to ten and ran my hand over my jaw, trying to grapple with my anger issues where the Petrov bastards were concerned.

“She’s mine,” I stated matter-of-factly. “And I'm not letting her go.” I leaned forward, clasped my hands together, and stared them in the eyes. “She’ll be my wife, and I’ll protect her and our baby with my life.”

Nikolai exchanged a glance with his brother, their unspoken communication clear. They were worried about their sister. I knew they were also worried about what this meant in the long run—not just for her world but for all of ours.

“Listen,” I said, putting myself in their situation because I’d been in their shoes. Twice. “I know how you feel. I’ve had to deal with the same shit you two are feeling right now… with *your* wives.” I cocked an eyebrow when they didn’t respond. “Seeing my sisters married off to you two dangerous fuckers was hard to accept, but I went with my gut and watched how you treated them.” I leaned back in the booth, glancing between them when I told each of them individually, “And I knew *you* cared about Amara, and *you* cared about Claudia. I knew both of you would kill to protect them. You’d die to keep them safe.”

They leaned back, and I felt some of the tension and their animosity fade as my words hung between us.

“That’s how *I* feel about Tatiana, *your* sister. She’s mine forever, *capisci*?”

After a long moment of silence, they let out identical exhales, as if what I said was good enough… for the time being.

“Good. That's what we wanted to hear,” Dmitry said. “Now, back to business.” He sat up in his chair, and I switched gears and focused on the ugly and gritty part of my world. “There’s some shit we want to talk about. Shit that’ll affect not only us but you and yours as well.”

I was all ears now, focused on what needed to be done.

“We’ve learned about a new threat.”

Instantly, I was on the offense, and my mind immediately thought of Carmine. “What kind of new threat?”

Dmitry didn't speak right away. He gestured for another round of drinks, and once we were left alone again, Nikolai was the one to start talking.

“They call themselves The Stygian Syndicate.” His tone was dark and menacing.

I frowned, leaning forward slightly. “What do you know?”

“We’ve learned of a new rogue group that is trying to infiltrate and rise in power. They’re clearly working with another group, one that has insider knowledge in order for them to know the shit they know,” Nikolai said, his voice growing deeper from his anger.

The tension was edging back in, and mine grew the more I thought about what Nikolai stated—“*...has insider knowledge…”*

Again, Carmine was the forefront of my mind, and the more I thought about it, the more I needed to broach this with the Petrovs.

“They’re staying underground, and it’s been a bitch finding any useful information about them.” Nikolai slowly grinned. “But it’s been fun as fuck experimenting with how far motherfuckers can be pushed to get what I want.”

I knew the sick Russian fucker was talking about torturing people to get information. Hell, I knew he did heinous shit to his enemies. There was even talk that Nikolai had torn the finger and toenails off a man for just cutting him off in traffic. That was always the rumor that popped into my head whenever I thought about just how crazy my brother-in-law was.

“Had to get creative just to get the minuscule shit we got.”

Dmitry snorted and shook his head after his psycho sibling spoke. “They’re organized and know their shit, given they’ve been able to do what they’ve done on our territory so far.” He cracked his knuckles. “They’re obviously powerful in their own right, and it’s clear they’re slowly making moves against not only us, but you and yours, too.”

“Maksim was just one piece in their plans,” I murmured to myself.

I thought about what they said, let that shit sink in, and knew I had to bring up my suspicions with them about Carmine. It was dangerous, though. We might’ve been allies because of family bonds, but we were still two very different sides of the same coin.

My thoughts kept circling back to the Head of Italy. After hearing about this new syndicate and all the moves that had taken place up until this point,

I had no doubt Carmine was involved. It was just too convenient, all the things falling into place about him being a major player.

Was he the leader of this new threat? Was he working with them in hopes he could gain more power? If I revealed all this shit to the Russians and I was wrong, this could blow up in the worst possible way.

But if I was right….

“We have a lot of shit between us, Gio,” Dmitry said. “You didn’t come to us after helping Tatiana, and you killed one of ours on our territory.”

I knew that wasn’t something they could just let go. It would eventually come back full circle. But it was clear that right now, we had bigger issues and threats.

I ran my hand over my jaw, and the sound of my palm moving over my scruff seemed overly loud.

Why had Carmine really ordered Maksim’s death? Why did he want specifically *me* to do the kill?

“I think the Head of Italy is trying to drive a wedge between me and you two.” I looked between the brothers. “I think he’s trying to implode both of our bases, so he can make a move with this new syndicate.”

Shit, I thought, as it really sank in and started making even more sense. *Fuck*. I grabbed my drink and tossed it back, the burn down my throat welcomed.

Nikolai and Dmitry studied me for a long moment, their expressions unreadable as they no doubt let what I said brew among the three of us. The tension surrounding us was still there, but everything had shifted to this new threat instead of each other.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that Carmine was behind everything—The Stygian Syndicate, me being the one to carry out Maksim’s death, and probably a whole host of other shitty betrayals.

It was all too connected to be a coincidence.

And the more I thought about it, how Carmine had to be in the thick of it, the more I realized he was probably involved in Tatiana’s attack.

My blood boiled, and I curled my hands into tight fists until my nails tore into my palms and broke the skin.

I looked up at the men and said, "Tatiana's assault.” It was the only thing I could speak aloud rationally and coherently. And judging by the tightness in their eyes and on their faces, they knew exactly what I meant by those two words.

“We need concrete proof that Carmine’s involved with The Stygian Syndicate. If he planned all this shit or is behind any piece of this bullshit, we need to know,” I told them when I could finally rein in my fury enough to get it out.

“If he had any hand in what happened to Tati, I’ll flay his skin from his bones.”

I had no doubts Nikolai would.

Dmitry nodded in agreement, and I was sure the eldest Petrov would have a few unique ideas in helping his crazy-ass brother out.

Carmine didn’t make mistakes, but I knew with arrogance and power, everyone slipped eventually. When people thought they were untouchable, that's when they started fucking up. If he was involved, I’d find the trail.

Nikolai leaned in and had a sadistic smile curving his lips. “And if we find proof? What then?” He started rubbing his hands together. “How about you just send him our way?”

I held his gaze. “We’ll cross that bridge if we get there.”

Dmitry’s eyes narrowed. “If Carmine is involved, this is going to destroy the Cosa Nostra from the inside out.”

“It’ll drag every-fucking-thing down. The Ruin will be turned upside down, and it'll cause an all-out war.” I rubbed the back of my head.

“It’s already a fucking war.”

I nodded at Dmitry. I wouldn’t let Carmine destroy everything I cared about.

There was a heavy fucking silence as the weight of it all settled on our shoulders. But I meant every word. “I’ll kill Carmine myself if I find out he was involved in Tatiana’s attack.” And I’d revel in it.

“We’re in this together,” Dmitry inserted, and I felt my eyebrows reach up to my fucking hairline. Never thought I’d hear those words directed at me, coming out of a Bratva member.

“Let's be smart about this shit,” Nikolai said, surprisingly being the one thinking rationally right now. “Everything could go to hell.”

Everything is already going to hell, just like Dmitry said.

“If Carmine betrayed the Cosa Nostra, his own people, he’ll be dealt with. If he betrayed *me*, I’ll castrate him and feed him his balls in a soup Tatiana makes.” The silence was long and heavy, and then Nikolai burst out laughing and slammed his hand on the table.

“Fucking hell, man. You’re crazier than me.”

“When it concerns Tatiana and my baby, I’ll burn the fucking world down, and it still wouldn’t satiate my need for blood and vengeance,” I told him, and I watched the brothers exchange a look, one that seemed eerily similar to one of approval.

A cold determination weighed down on all three of us then, and Dmitry ended our meeting with, “We’ll do what needs to be done when the time comes.”

Yeah, we fucking would.

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CARMINE

I sipped my liqueur in a dimly lit little restaurant in Palermo, Sicily. Conversation was low from the few patrons eating, but I noticed they kept their gazes averted from where I sat. They knew who I was. What I did.

My face was an unreadable mask. I had to have it in place. I'd never let anyone know what I thought or what my plans were.

I was meeting someone here tonight, someone who had traveled a great distance to have this face-to-face conversation.

My specialty, the reason I was where I was and how I'd gotten to the level of power I had, was because I could navigate the complex web of politics inside organized crime. I was the head of the Italian Cosa Nostra.

But this meeting was different.

I was betraying everyone and everything for the sake of gaining the ultimate level of control. The stakes were fucking high, and there was no going back now. I sipped more of the *Amaro Averna* and waited, but I didn't have to wait for long.

Moments later, the man I was expecting walked through the door. He wore all black, his head lowered, his gaze straight ahead.

Elias, Head of the Greek Mafia—The Stygian Syndicate—stopped in front of me and, after a second, gave a slow, arrogant smile. His short, black hair was styled away from his face, and the first few buttons of his shirt

were undone, showcasing the top of the dark ink I knew covered his entire chest.

"*Siediti*, Elias."

He smirked again and cocked a dark eyebrow, but then he accepted my suggestion as he grabbed the back of the chair and pulled it out before he took a seat.

I gestured for someone to bring Elias a glass of *Amaro Averna*. When it was set in front of him, my guest picked it up and tasted the alcohol.

Although he seemed calm on the outside, I could feel the brewing tension radiating off him.

"Elias," I began, keeping my voice steady. "How about we just cut to the chase?"

He stayed silent. Finally, after taking a longer drink of the liqueur, he set it down then tipped his head forward, wordlessly telling me to continue.

"We both know the Bratva's hold on Desolation is strong. The Cosa Nostra has an alliance since the Bianchi girls married the Petrov brothers, and it is *because* of that connection the peace has been kept—as fragile as it is on most days."

The Stygian Syndicate's production of "the fringe", a violent and powerfully addictive drug in Desolation, would serve as the catalyst for an aggressive power struggle from the inside out.

The fringe was cheap to produce and a highly addictive substance. Its slow introduction had enabled us to gain influence and partial control over the city's underground economy. Coupled with the Cosa Nostra's web of connections in the States to distribute the product, it had already garnered immense profit.

But money wasn't the main reason for this move.

We weren't hiding the fact that we were selling the fringe, but we also weren't broadcasting who we were or what we were doing. My goal was to slowly provoke a rage-induced response from the Petrovs.

"With the fringe as our weapon," Elias said, his voice breaking through my thoughts, "the streets of Desolation will run red."

"So much red we'll swim in it."

Elias grinned wide. "There's no going back. We've already started this shitstorm," he responded, his tone deep, his accent thick.

"Yes, and it's about time things change."

He leaned back, his eyes narrowing slightly. I could see the wheels turning in his head. The Greek Mafia was small and didn't have the manpower, or the backing and power, that other organizations did. But it was time that fucking changed.

"And what exactly will change, Carmine? What do you want to happen in the long run?"

We'd spoken at great lengths about this shit, but I knew he wanted to know the end result from where I stood.

I didn't like explaining myself to anyone. I didn't fucking let anyone know my end goal. I kept that shit to myself and only told them what they needed to know to get the job done.

But to obtain the kind of control I desired, to gain the type of power that would give me the fucking world on a silver platter, meant I needed to gain contacts from all over the world. And that's why I reached out to Elias and had him connect with his fucking men to put this all in motion. The Stygian Syndicate had been gaining strength quietly.

"The Bratva is powerful, and Desolation has been growing ever since the Petrov brothers took control. But their power over Desolation has made them arrogant. Aligning with you and yours, Elias, will give us both positions on the winning side of the inevitable power shift."

He raised an eyebrow. "You actually believe Dmitry and Nikolai Petrov will just roll over and present their bellies to us? You think we have a chance in hell of taking over their control?"

"Desolation is evolving, altering. The Ruin doesn't have the power it once did, not with how things have already changed ever since the Russians took control after they slaughtered their father. But we need a new order that understands the importance of expansion and wants to stick to the way it was back in the day. We need to bring back tradition." I leaned forward and grinned. "We are the future."

Elias smirked, setting his glass down. "Control. Influence. And the chance to mold Desolation into a hub that serves both our interests is what I want. It's what we both want."

I nodded and finished off my drink.

"Πρέπει να φάμε αυτούς στην κορυφή. Μετα θα μπουν όλοι στη θέση τους." *We need to take out the ones at the top. After that, they'll all fall into line.*

I nodded again after Elias spoke.

“Anyone in our way is expendable. We’ll take them all out and rebuild with the perfect army that no one and nothing can stop. We’ll be a fucking superpower.”

Elias nodded slowly, considering my words. “You've thought this through. I’ll give you that. But you know the Bratva will retaliate, and when Dmitry and Nikolai find out what’s going on and who’s behind it, they’ll bring the hammer down.”

I shrugged. “They will, no doubt. But by the time they realize the extent of our plans, it will be too late for them to do any real damage. Once it’s all said and done, we’ll be untouchable.”

“They’ll have no choice but to give in or fall like the rest of them.”

“Esatto.” *Exactly*.

A silence settled over the table. Finally, he nodded and grinned. “Let’s tear down Desolation and rebuild that motherfucker.”

We both knew this was just the beginning. Desolation was about to undergo an even bigger change than what it’d been going through the past several years, and we were the ones who were going to fuck it all up.

“Μη με απογοητεύεις, Κάρμαιν. Μια συμμαχία μεταξύ μας θα μας κάνει και τους δύο πολύ ισχυρούς άνδρες.” *Don’t let me down, Carmine. An alliance together will make both of us very powerful men.*

I never let anyone talk to me like that, to act like they had more dominion than I did. But Elias needed to think he had a semblance of control. It would be easier for him to fall into line and obey at the end of this.

Because the truth was, when my plan finally came to fruition, I would be the only one at the top.

“Ήρθε η ώρα να δουμε τον κόσμο να κάιγεται γύρω μας.” *It’s time to watch the world burn down around us.*

I grinned and replied back in Greek, “Και μετά θα το ξαναχτίσουμε όπως ακριβώς γαμημένα θέλουμε.” *And then we’ll rebuild it exactly how we fucking want.*

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TATIANA

It had been two weeks since everything had gone down in the locker room at Butcher and Son, and to say I was surprised things had been normal… was an understatement.

I didn’t know what Gio and my brothers talked about after the blowout, but they hadn’t killed each other, so whatever understanding they’d come to had definitely made my life easier.

I didn’t have to worry about sneaking around behind their backs. I didn't have to lie to them anymore. They might not accept—probably never would, if I were being honest—me being with Gio, but the fact of the matter was, they didn’t have a choice.

Because I was with him—in love with Gio—and nothing and no one would change that.

I glanced over at the man in question, who sat right beside me in his private plane.

The hum of the jet engines was a soothing rumble that filled my ears. I shifted on the buttery-soft leather seat, inhaling deeply and catching the dark, spicy undertones of Gio’s cologne.

He glanced at me, his bright blue eyes a stark contrast to his tan skin and black hair. “So beautiful,” he murmured under his breath and cupped my jaw, his thumb brushing along my bottom lip a second before he dipped in and kissed me.

Long and slow. So thoroughly that I felt my toes curl and my heart race.

But he pulled back far too soon, and I leaned forward, wanting more. He chuckled, low and deep.

“Your neediness is maddening, sweetheart,” he said, and I almost felt hurt until he continued, “I love it *too much*. But I hope you always crave me this way.”

I loved how his voice became gruff, like he was trying to control himself.

“I do.”

He hummed, and I realized I’d spoken out loud.

He leaned forward, his lips by my ear. “I want nothing more than to fuck you right here, right now.”

I licked my lips and softly moaned at the image that conjured up.

“But I have to have some kind of self-control, baby, especially where you’re concerned.”

“No, you don’t, Gio. I don’t want you to have any self-control where we’re concerned.”

“Dio, ragazza. Le cose che mi fai. Il modo in cui mi fai sentire mi fa impazzire.” *God, girl. The things you do to me. The way you make me feel drives me crazy.*

His cell vibrated, and he kissed me sweetly before answering it.

I focused out the window at the vastness of the sky stretching out around us. A crystal glass of water was set in front of me, and I glanced about at the opulence of the private jet. But I couldn't seem to keep my eyes off Gio, my gaze always returning to him no matter how hard I tried to take in anything else, as he spoke softly and deeply to someone in Russian.

Gio was always composed, always in control. And even though his tone was easy and steady, there was a tension that always surrounded him that told me how dangerous and powerful he was. It made my heart race.

I tried staring out the window again, but only after a moment of peering at the beauty of the open world around us, I felt him watching me. My eyes went right back to Gio, and I almost gasped at the possessiveness I saw directed right at me. As if he knew damn well I couldn’t stop admiring him.

Staring into his eyes was like falling into an abyss where only the two of us existed.

He hung up without another word, cutting off the other person I could hear still speaking, as he pulled the cell away from his ear then put it down

next to him. He cupped the back of my neck and pulled me toward him until our lips met in a soft kiss that soon heated into a frenzy.

And the longer we kissed, the more intense it became. There was no gentleness in the way he claimed me, and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

"I want more," I said against his lips, and he groaned in response.

I arched against him, craving more, needing more of Gio. His touch was addicting, and I knew I'd never get enough. This was where I belonged, and I wanted to stay right here, in this moment, forever.

When he finally pulled back, his breaths were hot and heavy. I saw and sensed erotic darkness pouring off of him.

"I'm going to make you see how much I want you… how much you mean to me, Tatiana." Gio said the words, low and filled with so much possession I almost told him there was no need to.

Almost.

He shifted so he could grip my waist and help me stand, and before I knew what was happening, he turned me around and gently pushed me forward with a big hand right between my shoulder blades.

I had to grip the seat ahead of us—my palms resting on the smooth leather as I curled my nails into it, holding on for whatever was about to happen in this vulnerable position. I was stretched out, the imbalance that forced me to keep my hands occupied a form of bondage without ties, making me feel exposed even though I was completely dressed.

I looked over my shoulder, feeling my cheeks heat because of how intently he watched me. I let my gaze travel lower and rolled my hips forward until I could see the massive erection pressing against his pant leg.

God, he was so hard for me.

And when he saw where I was staring, Gio grabbed the zipper of his slacks and dragged it down. He pulled out his huge, thick, and long cock and started stroking himself from root to tip until pre-cum beaded at the slit. He used it as lubrication and kept jerking off as I watched him.

"Lift your skirt, pull your panties down, and let me look at the prettiest pussy I've ever seen."

I shimmied the material up to my waist before I gripped the edge of my panties and pushed them down to my ankles. Before I knew what was about to happen, Gio slid his hands along my inner thighs and pulled my legs apart. But with my panties around my ankles, I could only spread them so

wide. It was enough for Gio to get to me, though… thank God. Not only did I need him to touch me, to sate this burning need, but I also wouldn't put it past him to rip my panties in order to give him the room he desired.

"So perfect," Gio said, seeming to be speaking to himself. He had his hands on my ass, his palms so big, so masculine, they covered the mounds.

I couldn't breathe, and the lack of oxygen was making me feel dizzy. It's why I didn't contemplate what his filthy plan was before Gio had my ass cheeks spread, the chilled air touching the most sensitive parts of me.

Goose bumps popped out along my flesh, and I shivered.

"God, you're so fucking beautiful," he growled, his mouth so close to my pussy I felt the gentle current of his warm breath along my folds and ass.

He ran his tongue up my pussy, starting at my clit and dragging it all the way until he was teasing along my throbbing opening. I shivered again, silently begging him to eat me out.

But to my disappointment, he pulled back, helped me to stand up straight again, and turned me around. Gio pulled me closer and curled his hands around my waist.

"So fucking sweet." He lifted my leg, my panties left on the floor, and placed my foot on the armrest, positioning me so I was spread and my pussy lips were parted for his viewing pleasure.

I was so wet I could feel my juices sliding against the lips of my pussy and down my inner thigh. I was ready for him and was close to begging Gio for it. But before I uttered a word, he leaned forward again and started eating me out.

He dragged his tongue through my soaked lips, pulling moans from me. I should have been humiliated because I knew the flight staff could hear me, but I was so lost in my pleasure I didn't care.

"More, Gio."

I placed my hands on his shoulders to steady myself as he licked and sucked on my clit.

"I'll give you more than you can handle, *cara*."

Not possible. I'll take whatever it is you want to give me.

He had his hands on my ass, squeezing the mounds almost painfully as he devoured me.

With one more lick through my pussy, he pulled away, his mouth glossy from my arousal, his breathing haggard as he stared into my eyes.

“I’m so fucking hard for you,” he said and reached down, rubbing his hand over his exposed, monstrous cock. “*Christ*.”

I could see how feral he was right now, and it turned me on like nothing else.

Before I could beg him to fuck me, Gio had his thumbs on the lips of my pussy, pulled them apart, and licked and sucked at my clit once again, this time like he couldn’t get enough.

I knew I couldn’t.

It was like he was dying for me, just like I was for him. And the fact that the flight staff could walk through the little door that gave us minimal privacy made this an even more exciting experience.

He ate me out until my legs shook, and I was on the verge of coming thirty-one thousand feet in the air. He moved his mouth over my clit and started sucking on it hard.

“You taste so damn good. So… *mine, cara*.”

And just like that, I came for him, digging my nails into his shoulders and riding the wave of ecstasy.

He grunted and renewed his efforts on my pussy until he drove my orgasm even higher. I was touching heaven right now and never wanted to come down.

When the pleasure faded, I sagged and exhaled roughly, my body shaking from the after-effects of my orgasm.

“My pretty girl,” he whispered. Reaching down to the floor, Gio picked up my panties, placing the silky fabric under his nose and inhaling, breathing deeply before spearing me with a possessive gaze.

Groaning a curse, he grudgingly helped me step into them, tugged my skirt down into place, and pulled me onto his lap.

For long seconds, he just held me, rubbing his hand over my thigh before moving it to my belly, and then rested his palm on my abdomen. I collapsed, my head on his shoulder, and closed my eyes, knowing I could have fallen asleep like this, with Gio holding me tightly and me knowing nothing and no one would hurt me as long as he was watching over me.

“I love you, Tatiana. I love you with everything in my cold, dark heart, and I never want to be without you.”

I felt a small smile curve my lips and then pressed them to the side of his neck. “I love you more.”

He held me tighter and whispered, “Not possible.”

We sat there so long that I started to drift off, with Gio's palm still on my belly, the heat and weight of it causing my insides to flutter.

When he shifted slightly, it roused me. I saw him reach into his pocket. I rubbed the drowsiness from my eyes and saw him pull out a small, velvet box. My breath hitched because I knew what it was.

"I've never been a man who expressed his feelings or showed emotion, Tatiana." Gio's voice was low and rough. He always had this natural menace in his tone that sent a thrill down my spine. "You're mine. You understand that, right?"

I nodded because there was no other reaction or answer I would ever give him.

"But that's not enough. I want more. I want it all." He opened it and showed me the diamond solitaire. "I want to make you my wife. I *need* to."

I stared at the ring. It was so large and dazzling it caught the light coming through the window.

My heart was pounding in my chest.

"Marry me. I won't take no for an answer."

I could have laughed at how gruff his proposal was. There were no grand romantic gestures coupled with it, but I loved Gio's rawness.

"I may be the devil from deep within the pits of hell, but you're my queen, and that'll never change." He pulled the ring out and took my hand, slipping the diamond onto my ring finger. "Marry me," Gio demanded, his tone leaving no room for argument. He spoke like a man who was used to getting what he wanted.

I stared down at my finger… speechless.

"I'll protect you with my life. I'll make sure you and our children never want for anything and are never afraid a day in your lives."

I knew he spoke the truth.

"I'll worship you, *cara*."

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of the ring on my finger like the very promise that he'd move heaven and hell for me.

I was meant to be his, and there was no place I'd rather be.

"I'm not an easy man to love, but you're in my heart, sweetheart. So this proposal isn't a request. It's a demand, and it's a vow that I'll never let you go."

If any other man had told me that, I might have kneed him in the balls. But with it being Gio, I felt my heart swell and my belly flutter.

“I want to say I’d accept no for an answer, but that would be a fucking li—”

“Like I’d ever say no,” I whispered and cupped his face. The scruff on his cheeks and chin was rough under my palm, but it reminded me of how masculine he was. “Yes, Gio.” My voice trembled with all the emotion I felt for him. “I want you forever.”

I swore I saw a flicker of something pass across his ruggedly handsome face. Was it… relief? God, did this strong, powerful man actually think I’d ever deny him? I loved him more than I could ever put into words.

And then he groaned and crushed his lips against mine, as a sort of silent, brutal, and passionate promise between us. I loved that he was anything but gentle. Gio showed me how much he wanted me with every single touch.

And for the rest of the flight, he held me on his lap as he ran his hands up and down my arms and legs before rubbing small circles on my belly. He was petting me, I realized, as if he couldn’t help himself, couldn’t keep his hands off me.

When the jet finally touched down on the West Coast, I felt my nervousness finally take the forefront. I’d only been to the West Coast a few times in my life, but this felt different because I was here in Gio’s domain as his fiancée.

I glanced down at my ring, at the diamond that was massive and surrounded by sapphires. The light caught it, and it sparkled. A little smile curved the corners of my mouth.

Everything felt almost surreal.

“Come on, baby. Let me show you my world.” He took my hand and led me off the jet and into a waiting black car that sat on the tarmac.

The drive to his home was about an hour, and the whole time, Gio kept me pressed close to his side. I realized he loved placing his big hand on my belly and just holding me there, as if he were still trying to come to terms that it was all real.

I know exactly how you feel.

We finally pulled up to his home, and I leaned forward to look out the window at the massive, sprawling estate.

The mansion was imposing, with perfectly manicured landscaping and a warmth that seemed almost like a façade to cover up the horror I knew Gio had been put through behind those walls.

It wasn’t until we were inside that I realized Claudia and Amara were also there, along with Dmitry and Nikolai, who stood like overprotective watch dogs beside them.

My sisters-in-law greeted me with a warmth that always seemed to surround each of them. It wasn’t until I looked at my brothers that I saw their expressions and the tension radiating off them.

Okay, they were here on business with Gio, and judging by the darkness I felt taking over by the second, the more I knew I wanted to get out of this house and check out the grounds.

“Can you show me around outside?”

The girls picked up on my need to get the hell away and nodded toward the hallway that led to a sunroom I could make out down the hall.

Before I was led away, Gio caught me around my waist and pulled me in close. He curled a hand around the back of my neck and dipped his head to kiss me long and deep. Right in front of my brothers and their wives.

Dmitry and Nikolai started talking shit in Russian under their breath, and I felt Gio’s smirk against my lips. That had me chuckling and breaking away. I stared up at Gio, knowing the last thing I wanted was for another fight to break out. Although, surprisingly, my brothers stayed back and just glowered with irritation.

I didn’t miss how they kept glancing at my hand, and I realized I wore that big fucking rock on my ring finger but hadn’t told them about being newly engaged.

I guess they know now.

“Miss me while I'm gone?” I whispered as I smiled up at Gio.

He got all serious and leaned down to murmur against my lips, “When you’re not with me, it feels like my heart is gone.”

I felt my belly flutter at his words because he said it with such fervor that I knew he spoke the truth.

With one more kiss, I forced myself to turn away and follow the girls, but I glanced over my shoulder to see my brothers and future husband heading in the other direction.

We found our way into the sunroom and then went outside to the garden. I felt my eyes widen at how beautiful and peaceful everything was. I’d always lived amongst the cement and steel of a bustling city. Seeing this serene oasis made me feel as if I missed out on a whole other kind of world.

“Mama!” a little voice shouted, and I glanced to the side to see Luca running toward us with a bundle of flowers in his tiny hands.

The sight of my nephew had a big smile spreading across my face.

Amara scooped up her son and held him tightly, and all of us went over to one of the stone benches to sit down, letting Luca run around and pick more flowers.

“Congrats,” Claudia said softly, and I looked down at my ring and then smiled as I glanced up at her. But she was staring at my belly. Instinctively, I placed my hand on my stomach and felt this warm glow settle over me.

“I don’t have to tell you that secrets rarely stay hidden for long with the type of men in our lives.”

That made me chuckle because that was so damn true.

“I think congrats are in order for *all* of us.” I stared at Claudia, since Gio recently told me that she—as well as her sister, who had gotten pregnant again before either of us—was now expecting, and I exhaled as reality settled in deep.

“Crazy, right?” she prompted in a soft voice as we stared out at the gardens. “That we are where we are.”

I knew what she meant and couldn’t have agreed any more deeply.

“Truer words have never been spoken.” We all laughed at how crazy the world was, but had it ever been better than it was now?

And I knew it was only going to get better.

As we sat amongst the flowers, with the sun shining down and warming everything it touched, I took a deep breath and just let my happiness consume me. And although I wanted to hang on to this euphoria for as long as I could—for my entire life—in our world, happiness was always poisoned by darkness.

But for now, at this moment, I didn’t think about any of that shit. I just focused on the here and now and taking one day at a time.

I allowed myself to enjoy the fact that I was going to be an aunt again, bringing my total to three little ones I’d get to spoil and then hand back over to their parents. I let the joy take over that I was newly engaged and had a man who loved me and our unborn baby more than anything else.

I felt the warmth of my sisters-in-laws’ support and that my brothers accepted I was happy and were letting me make my own life decisions.

In our world, where love and darkness were like oil and water and giving into your happiness could mean life or death, I was finally being

selfish and taking what I wanted.

And fuck anyone or anything that tried to change that for me.

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GIO

I’d taken Dmitry and Nikolai to my office that overlooked the gardens simply because I wanted to keep an eye on Tatiana. I couldn’t stop thinking about her, couldn’t stop touching her when she was near.

I’d had business to deal with on the West Coast, and because my sisters wanted to come back “home” to visit, it was the perfect chance for Dmitry and Nikolai to come and for us to deal with all the shit we found out since the last time we met up.

Seeing the women in the garden brought a smile to my face. This home had held a lot of shitty, nightmarish memories. But over the years, after my father had been killed and my mother had moved away, I tried my hardest to make good memories for my sisters. I wanted them to know this place could be one in which they found happiness and comfort.

I turned and faced the Russian brothers, who had their gazes trained out the windows as well, no doubt admiring their wives and enjoying the peace on their sister’s face. I paced, my mind racing with all the information I found out from my informants.

A bit of money and drugs tossed their way opened more doors for finding out even more shit. It helped that they knew my reputation and that I’d cut off tips of fingers and toes to get what I wanted. Needless to say, they all sang like fucking canaries.

I moved over to my desk and took a seat at the same time Dmitry moved from the window. The silence between the three of us was thick,

broken only by the occasional distant sound of Luca screeching in happiness as he ran around.

“What did you find out about The Stygian Syndicate?” I growled, finally breaking the silence. I leaned back and looked over at Dmitry. After a second, Nikolai finally turned and faced me as well but still stood by the window, so he could peek out each time his son let out a squeal. Just in case.

Dmitry scrubbed a hand over his dark hair and gestured for Nikolai to speak.

“The Stygian Syndicate is the Greek Mafia.”

I’d found out as much, so I added, “And Carmine’s been working with them.”

Dmitry's eyes seemed dark and cold. “The Stygian Syndicate came out of fucking nowhere. But it’s clear they aren’t working alone, even before we knew Carmine was involved.”

I didn't know the hard facts and details about Carmine’s connection, but there were murmurs about the Head of Italy dipping into other business ventures, and I’d found out enough to know that his rogue bullshit was causing issues.

“You’re sure about Carmine?” both Nikolai and Dmitry asked in unison.

“I don’t have any hard proof, but I know he’s doing rogue shit. He was the one to make the order about Maksim, and he specifically wanted *me* to carry it out.”

Dmitry growled, and I could feel an iciness settle over the room.

“He wanted me to do it, so it caused issues between the three of us. He wanted that rift, that tear,” I murmured, cursing at how I hadn’t come to that reality sooner.

Mother-fucking-bastard.

But what I didn't understand was why Carmine—Head of the Cosa Nostra in Italy—was working with a much smaller crime organization. It made me question what said Mafia had that Carmine wanted that badly.

“What I don’t understand is why,” I said to myself. “Carmine is at the top of the Italian Mafia.” I was speaking louder now, my thoughts broadcasted to the other two men. “He has power, resources. Why would he lower himself by reaching out to work with the Greek Mafia?”

Dmitry’s jaw tightened, and a hard pause of complete silence followed my words. I could see the brothers were rolling this around in their heads,

knowing something I didn’t, or maybe reaching for a reason.

“Because the Greek Mafia has something he doesn’t—and that something is what we need to find out.” Nikolai started pacing now.

“No doubt Carmine’s been using the Greek Mafia to get their hands dirty because he doesn't want to.”

“Well, it’s our mission now to fucking find out why Carmine wants to use and work with The Stygian and what his end goal is.”

Dmitry nodded. “He’s a fucking snake,” he seethed, and the sound of him grinding his teeth echoed in the room.

“Carmine’s promised them something—”

“Something fucking big,” Nikolai cut me off, his voice low, menacing.

Behind my rage was the cold, bitter taste of betrayal. I felt an icy wave of realization wash over me. Carmine had done all of this behind my back, behind the Cosa Nostra’s back.

Jesus Christ… the betrayal cut deep. It was sharper than any blade.

“When we find out what the fuck is going on, we hit back. Hard.” I stared Nikolai and Dmitry in the eyes. “We show Carmine and everyone involved with him we don’t fuck around. And anyone who comes knocking on our door will get our wrath.” My lips curled into a bitter smile. “I can guarantee one fucking thing. Carmine will regret ever thinking he could betray us.”

Nikolai cracked his knuckles, his smile cold and fierce. “Let’s remind everyone who fucking runs Desolation.”

Nah… I’ll fucking remind Carmine who should be running the Cosa Nostra.

Me.

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EPILOGUE

GIO

Three months later

I was sweaty and sore as I stepped through the front door of my penthouse.

The scent of garlic and basil filled the apartment, and I heard the sounds of pans banging and dishes clanking together coming from the kitchen. Yet, it wasn't the promise of a home-cooked meal that enticed me but the very thought that my girl was here, and I knew she'd be just as anxious to see me as I was to see her.

I'd never felt as if any place was a real home, but I quickly learned that wherever Tatiana was, that's where home was for me.

It had been three months since I declared Tatiana was mine to her family and the revelation that she was pregnant with my baby came to light. And since then, I'd been inseparable from her. I couldn't help myself. Wherever Tatiana was, that's where I wanted to be.

After setting my gym bag on the floor by the front door, I took off my sneakers, tore my damp, white shirt off, and wiped the sweat from my face with the material. I'd made sure Tatiana had no choice but to move in with me the moment she told me about the baby. There had been no room for debate. No room for her to consider anything else.

It might have been an overbearing, dominating demand from me, but fuck, the very thought of not having Tatiana by my side was not an option I would live with.

I needed her close, and there was no shame in how I felt. I didn't try to hide or deny my feelings or emotions. Not where she was concerned. My PDA game with Tatiana was off the charts, and I fucking dared any motherfucker to make a snide remark about it or to even think I was weak.

In fact, I wanted everyone to know she was mine. I wanted everyone to know I would protect her above all else, that I'd keep her safe from the dark world that threatened us daily.

The kitchen was to the left of the front door, but I couldn't see my girl clearly. I walked over shirtless, my cock already thickening with the very idea I'd be able to touch her soon enough.

I leaned against the entryway to the kitchen and crossed my arms as I just watched her. Tatiana stood at the stove, her back to me, and my gaze traveled up and down her form. Fuck, she looked good in those little black cotton shorts and formfitting white shirt. She was a tiny thing, but her curves were even more generous since she was growing my baby.

She started humming to the soft music coming from her phone that sat on the counter to the side. But her humming was broken up by her occasional curse when she didn't like how something was going while she cooked.

I smiled, feeling this hard warmth settle deep in my chest. I realized I was rubbing the spot above my heart, that ache something I always welcomed.

My fingers itched to go over to her and undo her messy bun. When she turned partially to the side to grab a ladle, I could see the curve of her slightly swollen belly pressing against her T-shirt. She'd finally started showing over the past month, and it was hard to keep my hands off her even more now.

Knowing she was growing *my child* inside of her did something primal and possessive to me. The sight of her like this made everything male within me clench with ferocity.

I'd reached my limit staying back from her and just watching. I walked up behind her and wrapped my arms around my girl's waist, letting my palms slide to her front, and spread my fingers over her gently rounded belly.

"Mmm," she hummed and sank back into me, her head resting against my chest and her eyes fluttering closed. I dipped my head and kissed the

side of her neck. “I’ve missed you,” she whispered and set the ladle down before turning in my arms, rising on her toes, and kissing me softly.

“Mmm.” It was my turn to hum. “I can tell dinner is gonna be fucking good.”

She laughed. “Yeah? Why’s that?”

I dragged my tongue along her lips and dipped the muscle into her mouth. “I can tell because you’ve been tasting the sauce.”

She pulled back and gave me a mock scowl, but the corner of her lips curled in a smile. “I make one good-ass pasta sauce, baby,” she teased.

“Let me taste that pretty pussy, little girl.” I hadn’t meant to be so fucking vulgar, not when she was in a lighthearted mood, but my cock was harder than granite. Yet, she surprised the fuck out of me when, instead, she sank to her knees and slid my sweatpants down my legs.

I groaned, my cock throbbing as she freed me, my dick springing forward and already leaking pre-cum. I groped the base. The only thing running through my mind was how good she looked, staring up at me with my cock bobbing between us and my crown leaking like a fucking faucet.

“Clean up the mess you’re making of Daddy,” I growled and aimed my cockhead at her mouth. She opened instantly and dragged her tongue along the slit, licking up the pre-cum and swallowing every drop. “Mmm, you’re such a good girl.”

“I’m only *your* good girl,” she muttered around my cock before licking the tip again. “I can’t get enough of you,” she added, before taking my length to the back of her throat and gagging just the way I taught her how I liked it.

I had my hands buried in her hair and guided her head back and forth, controlling the pace and depth of my dick sliding in her throat.

“I don’t deserve you,” I groaned when she gagged again, spit dripping out the corner of her mouth. She tried to pull back, but I kept my hands in her hair and her mouth around my shaft. “But I’m a selfish bastard and not letting you go, even though you’re better than me… deserve someone better than me.” The last part was whispered too low, and I knew she couldn’t hear.

She sucked me hard and long and to the point I was on the verge of coming. But I wanted to have a massive, full load for her tonight when I filled her little, pretty cunt with my cum and watched it slip out of her bared pussy.

So, using all the damn strength I had reserved, I stepped back, hearing my cock popping free of her mouth, and helped her to stand. I cupped either side of her face and kissed her long and deep, my cock throbbing and reminding me I could be draining my balls down her throat and into her belly right about now.

I tasted the salty flavor of my cum on her tongue and groaned because I loved knowing it was my flavor and scent overtaking her.

When she broke away, I was about to forcefully take another kiss from her. She gasped and placed her hand on her belly, and my desire faded fast as fuck. I could see how wide her eyes were as she ran her palm over her bump, and worry was at the forefront of my mind right away.

“What’s wrong?” Gone was my arousal, and in its place was my readiness to fix whatever the fuck was going on.

She shook her head and looked up at me at the same time she grabbed my wrist and brought my hand to her belly. For a second, neither of us moved or spoke. All I could feel and hear was my heart racing in my ears.

And then I felt it… a slight tap beneath my palm. My eyes got wide as fuck as I stared at where I touched, then looked into Tatiana’s eyes. I smiled, one of the rare, genuine ones that only my girl could pull out of me.

“We got to feel the first kick together,” she whispered and rested her forehead on my chest. For long moments, we just stood there, and I could have gotten lost in this moment, just letting myself forget about everything except how good Tatiana felt in my arms.

She was the one to pull back and tipped her head, her gaze catching mine. Fuck… there it was—that connection I’d never felt with any other person in my life. And since I gave in to my girl and said fuck it, that connection had only deepened.

We broke apart and finished making dinner, and once we were seated and ready to eat, all I could do was stare at her and smile as she plated spaghetti and meatballs. Her wedding ring caught the light, and my cock jerked at the sight of that diamond.

It meant she was mine.

It had been an intimate ceremony in the heart of Italy with only our closest family in attendance. We’d decided to honeymoon for a month, starting out by spending half the time in Sicily and then using the remaining time traveling the Russian countryside.

It was a reminder that, despite the darkness in our lives, there was still beauty to be found when we had each other. And seeing how happy she was when we were away from the toxicity of the real world in which we lived, I made a vow to take her traveling frequently.

But even now, as happy as I was that Tatiana was mine and knowing she'd have our first child before we even knew it, I couldn't ignore all the bullshit brewing on the horizon where the Bratva, Cosa Nostra, and Carmine were concerned.

We still hadn't gotten concrete proof of him and The Stygian Syndicate being connected to each other, but we were getting closer. We wanted to make sure we had all our shit in place to take Carmine down.

The fragile alliance between the Bratva and Cosa Nostra wasn't about to be ripped away because of some selfish, arrogant motherfucker.

We ate, and the natural flow of conversation filled the space between us. I listened to her tell me how her day went and had a perpetual smile on my face just hearing the soft lilt of her voice. I couldn't help but be struck by how surreal this all felt.

Fuck, I thought. I—a goddamn piece-of-shit villain in my own story—had caused so much death and destruction in my life. Yet, here I was. With *her*. With a family on the way. And damn… getting my happily ever after like I was a damn fairy-tale princess.

"I don't deserve this," I whispered to myself.

I thought it had been barely audible, but when Tatiana frowned and sat back in her chair, I knew she'd heard my admission.

I saw the way her eyes filled with the kind of love I never thought I'd see directed at me. But she would never love me at the level that I loved her. Not even close. My feelings for her went so far beyond normal and rational that I was a fucking obsessed stalker for Tatiana.

"Yes, you do," she finally said, but there was a firmness in her voice that had me chuckling.

I didn't argue because I loved hearing her sweet words toward me. I didn't say shit, and instead, I rose, lifted her easily and sat back down, pulling her onto my lap. As I looked at her, I felt a wave of disbelief once again.

How had I, a man covered in ink to hide my scars, who bathed in the blood of my enemies, ended up being the luckiest fucking bastard in the world?

I took her hand in mine, loving the feel of her soft, warm skin against me, and knew one thing for certain. I'd burn the world down to keep this. To keep her.

But first, I was going to take her to our room, strip her naked, and rememorize every inch of her body with my tongue before I slid my cock deep into her tight, little pussy. If she wasn't already pregnant, I would have gotten her knocked up tonight.

I stood then and held her close as I strode down the hall. I laid her on our bed and spread her thighs wide to get to work at the best fucking job in the world. Making my wife come.

The End.

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